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Indigenismo in the Mexican Photographs of Tina Modotti:
The Revolutionary and the *Indigenista*

Shannon Dame

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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Carl Sederholm
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Brigham Young University

December 2011

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ABSTRACT

Indigenismo in the Mexican Photographs of Tina Modotti: The Revolutionary and the *Indigenista*

Shannon Dame

Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature
Master of Arts

During Tina Modotti's time in Mexico in the 1920s, much of her photography and political activities focused on and fought for the rights of those who had been previously overlooked and marginalized, namely the indigenous people of Mexico. Many government officials, artists and intellectuals at the time believed that it was through the indigenous culture that Mexico could redeem itself and create its own national identity. *Indigenismo*, the philosophy that supported this claim, was of interest to Modotti and was a recurring theme throughout her photography. Following the Mexican Revolution of 1910, *indigenismo* appeared to be the solution to establishing this new identity that was authentically Mexican and distinct from the perceived corruption of Europe and North America. However, the principles of this theory were paradoxical in that proponents supported incorporating indigenous elements into Mexican society, but they also supposed that the only way to recreate the country was by dismissing and destroying these native cultures.

Modotti was not as interested in advocating a rebuilding of Mexico as she was in promoting social equality among all races and groups of people in the country, similar to what international Marxism endorsed. *Indigenismo* to Modotti was more of a way to give voice to the marginalized indigenous people who had been forgotten politically, educationally and artistically for centuries. Through three phases of her photographic career in Mexico—her early phase (which included the *Idols Behind Altars* project), *Mexican Folkways*, and her work done in Tehuantepec—we can see how Modotti progressed as an *indigenista* artist. Although her audience varied in each of these three phases, Modotti's commitment to, and portrayal of, Mexico's indigenous culture was a central unifying theme in her work. This study argues that the photographs of Tina Modotti illustrate her concept of *indigenismo* by celebrating what she perceived as strong, egalitarian indigenous communities that appealed to her Marxist political philosophy. Modotti sought to counter previous distorted or exaggerated misconceptions of indigenous culture, and she tried to compensate for this lack of authenticity within the Mexican national identity and Mexican art through her photography.

Keywords: Diego Rivera, *Idols Behind Altars*, *indigenismo*, *Mexican Folkways*, Post-Revolutionary Mexico, Tehuantepec, Tina Modotti

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to first express my deep and profound gratitude to my thesis chair Dr. Allen Christenson who has been instrumental in the creation of this thesis through his continued mentoring and patience. His persistent reminders and strong recommendations to include “more examples” and “more quotes” from primary sources—among other suggestions—have improved my writing and research abilities. Also, I am deeply grateful for the times he made me struggle (amidst my complaints) to figure things out on my own even when he knew the answer. That has probably had the largest impact on my growth as a scholar.

Thanks are also due to Dr. Carl Sederholm who has spent time reading this thesis despite his lack of familiarity with the subject matter. His mentoring and teaching over the years have taught me how to ask good research questions and how to enter an academic conversation.

Many thanks go to Dr. Doug Weatherford who gave me the idea for this topic in the first place. Without his guidance, I never would have discovered that I have such a passion for Post-Revolutionary Mexico, and I would still be struggling today to find a direction for my academic career.

An Acknowledgements page would not be complete without thanking Carolyn Hone who has been so supportive and wonderful throughout my graduate career at BYU.

At the risk of forgetting to mention all of the many family members, friends, acquaintances and even strangers who have helped me through the process of creating this thesis, I will only mention the most important. The biggest thank you is saved for my hero. Thanks, Mom.

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INTRODUCTION

When Tina Modotti travelled to Mexico in 1923, she anticipated participating in a great national, cultural renaissance. Early on she began interacting with the leading artists and intellectuals of the day including Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Jean Charlot and Xavier Guerrero to name a few. She was fascinated by the artwork that was being created in that country, and she was intrigued by the many theories that promoted social reform. She learned photography from her lover, Edward Weston, and was mentored by him as her own unique style started to develop. After two years in Mexico, Modotti reached a critical point in her artistic, political and personal life. Up until the summer of 1925, Modotti's time in Mexico had largely been devoted to assisting Edward Weston and conversing with the myriad of artists and intellectuals that surrounded her. Despite the constant intellectual stimulation she was experiencing, the poverty and racial prejudices that abounded in Mexico pressed on her mind. It was during that summer of 1925, when Edward Weston had returned to the United States for a brief visit with his family, that Modotti was afforded the time to concentrate more fully on her own work and artistic growth. The abundance of social problems in Mexico continued to concern her and affect her ability to create. In a candid letter to Edward Weston during this time, 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—. . . .

. . . . I am forever struggling to mould life according to my temperament and needs—in other words *I put too much art in my life*—too much energy—and consequently I have not much left to give to art—. (Modotti, *Letters* 39-40)

For Modotti, life and art had become inseparable, and by this point it seemed an insurmountable task for her to continue to create art when other matters seemed more important. This discovery and subsequent correspondence with Weston show the beginnings of Modotti's life-long attempt to reconcile her social views with her photography.

Modotti's compassionate nature was often acknowledged by her friends and acquaintances as they watched her sympathize and identify with anyone that could be considered oppressed, marginalized or otherwise overlooked (Albers, *Shadows* 172-73; Argentero 129). Her dedication to these types of individuals guided her political activism and values throughout her life, and at the same time, remnants of those values began to appear in her early photography shortly after having arrived in Mexico. We see this in her numerous portrayals of the hands, tools and daily labors of common Mexican workers as she elevates seemingly simple people and tasks to a level of dignity and respect.

The decades immediately following the Mexican Revolution of 1910 saw the rise of many movements and ideologies¹ that proposed ways to redefine what it meant to be Mexican and to reform some of the social challenges Modotti and others had observed. One of these movements, *indigenismo*², sought to express how indigenous individuals and cultures should fit

¹ Some of these include: *la Mexicanidad*, *indigenismo* (a facet of *la Mexicanidad*), democracy, communism and socialism.

² For more information on *indigenismo*, see: Brading, David A. "Manuel Gamio and Official *Indigenismo* in Mexico." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 7.1 (1988): 75-89. Print.; Dawson, Alexander S. *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico*. Tucson: U of AZ P, 2004. Print.; Gamio, Manuel. *Forjando Patria: Pro-Nacionalismo*. Trans. Fernando Armstrong-Fumero. Boulder, CO: UP of Colorado, 2010. Print.; Knight, Alan. "Racism, Revolution, and *Indigenismo*: Mexico, 1910-1940." *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870 – 1940*. Ed. Richard Graham. Austin: U of Texas P, 1990. 71-113. Print.; Noble, Andrea. *Tina Modotti: Image, Texture, Photography*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2000. Print.; Tierney, Dolores. *Emilio Fernández: Pictures in the Margins*.

into the larger context of Mexican identity. Proponents of the theory sought to incorporate elements of indigenous society into the national culture while at the same time advocating for equal rights for those people. *Indigenismo* was a concept that resonated with Modotti and became a recurring theme in her photography. Through three phases of her photographic career in Mexico—her early phase (which included the *Idols Behind Altars* project), *Mexican Folkways*, and her work done in Tehuantepec—we can see how Modotti progressed as an *indigenista* artist. Although her audience varied in each of these three phases, Modotti’s commitment to, and portrayal of, Mexico’s indigenous culture was a central unifying theme in her work. I argue that the photographs of Tina Modotti illustrate her concept of *indigenismo* by celebrating what she perceived as a strong, egalitarian indigenous community that appealed to her Marxist political philosophy. Modotti sought to counter previous distorted or exaggerated misconceptions of indigenous culture, and she tried to compensate for this lack of authenticity within the Mexican national identity and Mexican art through her photography.

Although Modotti’s photographs were widely published and even gained some international acclaim in the 1920s³, her work was largely overlooked academically until the 1980s.⁴ Since that time the scope of the scholarship surrounding Modotti is largely biographical, or it approaches her work from a feminist perspective. While a feminist reading is indeed essential to understanding the works of Modotti, this scholarship has failed to acknowledge

Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007. Print.; Vasconcelos, José. “La raza cósmica.” *Anatomía del mexicano*. Ed. Roger Bartra. Barcelona: Plaza Janés, 2002. 63-73. Print

³ By the late 1920s and early 1930s Modotti’s photographs had begun to appear in a number of international journals, magazines and periodicals. Some of these publications include: *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* and *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* (Berlin); *CROM*, *Forma*, and *Mexican Folkways* (Mexico City); *New Masses* and *Creative Arts* (New York); and *BIFUR* and *L’Art Vivant* (Paris). Additionally, her work appeared in an exhibition at the Berkeley Museum of Art in October 1929 (Lowe 34, 42).

⁴ In conjunction with a 1982 combined exhibition of Tina Modotti and Frida Kahlo’s work at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, Laura Mulvey and Peter Woolen published an essay on Modotti’s photographic career. As Sarah Lowe explains Mulvey and Woolen were the first to “consider Modotti’s photographic output seriously and to discuss her work critically,” and since that time many scholars have followed their lead in a feminist approach to Modotti (10). See Mulvey, Laura and Peter Wollen. “Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti.” *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*. Eds. Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris. New York: Phaidon, 1992. 145-159. Print.

indigenismo as an essential and recurring theme throughout her photographic career. A few scholars⁵ have recognized the influence of *indigenismo* in some of Modotti's work, but little analysis has been devoted to understanding *how* Modotti views her indigenous subjects and what she proposes their role should be in Mexican society. Considering that a large portion of Modotti's *oeuvre* is dedicated to her theory of *indigenismo*—particularly with regard to bringing Mexican indigenous people out of obscurity—this philosophy should be more closely examined in her works.

While a study of this nature is lacking and would therefore be beneficial, it does present several challenges. One of these challenges comes when one considers how indigenous culture is depicted through various levels of representation in the works of Modotti. Initially, we have Tina Modotti, an Italian who spent her early years living in relative poverty, but spent her youth and part of her twenties living in west-coast United States. While she identifies with the Mexican indigenous people to a certain extent in that she knows what it is like to be poor and a minority,⁶ she still looks at these various groups through the lens of an Italian-American cultural perspective. As she didn't grow up in the country, hadn't spent extensive amounts of time with them, nor had she participated in their lifestyle on a day-to-day basis, her interpretation of anything indigenous is largely determined by her perception as an outsider to those cultures.

⁵ See Albers, Patricia. "Tina Modotti and the Indians of Mexico." *Dear Vocio: Photographs by Tina Modotti*. November 8, 1996 – January 11, 1997. Patricia Albers, curator. University Art Gallery and Center for the Humanities, U of California. La Jolla, CA: University Art Gallery, 1997. 20-58. Print; Deetsch, Andrea Jeanne. "Tina Modotti and *Idols Behind Altars*." MA thesis. U of Louisville, 2003. Print.

⁶ When Modotti was between the ages of three and nine, the family lived in Austria where they had found work. Lowe states that at the time "Italian and Slavic immigrants in Austria found themselves the objects of blatant discrimination—politically organized and racially motivated—that was more pronounced than elsewhere in Europe...and would have served as Tina's first lesson on class consciousness. Family legend has it that the grinding poverty she witnessed in Austria and the immigrants' treatment at the hands of the Austrians kindled Tina's devotion to social causes" (13). Additionally as a film star in Hollywood, Modotti was often typecast as a gypsy, a member of a harem or other villainous characters due to the "exotic allure" of her physical appearance. This often bothered Modotti, and as Mildred Constantine explains, "This crude exploitation was limiting and offensive to both her dignity and her aspirations" (28).

Modotti is also unique in that her perception of Mexican indigenous society is filtered through an additional layer of interpretation. Her interaction with the indigenous cultures of Mexico is primarily from an observational standpoint or second-hand through the eyes of Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera or David Alfaro Siqueiros. Much of Modotti's time in Mexico was spent with the intellectual and artistic elite of the day, each of whom had their own distinct views on the purpose and importance of indigenous people and culture. Many of these artists and scholars will be examined closely over the next several pages to see how they influenced the young photographer, but it was Diego Rivera who perhaps more than anyone else was responsible for the formulation of Modotti's ideas of *indigenismo*. In light of the influence that Rivera had on Modotti's interpretation of *indigenismo*, it is also necessary to take into account that many of Rivera's ideas towards indigenous society came as a result of his own biased opinions of these cultures. In order to assert his own political philosophies, he idyllically portrayed these groups as Marxist, classless societies where individuals worked for the good of the whole. While doing this he noticeably overlooked aspects of these cultures which argued against this view, including power struggles and a hierarchy of classes (Braun 241).

The other challenge that surfaces in any study based on *indigenismo* in 1920's Mexico is synthesizing a working definition of this complex concept. Although *indigenismo* was frequently discussed and debated among artists, intellectuals and politicians of the day, Alexander Dawson explains that even these individuals didn't share "a coherent ideology" (Dawson xiv). Almost every person at the time had their own definition and methods of utilizing *indigenismo* in the decades immediately following the Revolution, and because of this, it will be necessary to trace not only the genesis of the theory but also the origins of Modotti's own understanding of it. As there are very few documents available to us that contain her own words

outlining her social and political beliefs—aside from a few letters to Weston and, of course, her photographs—Modotti’s concept of *indigenismo* can only be understood through a close examination of her work and by studying those individuals that surrounded and influenced her both artistically and politically (Figarella 133). While it is impossible to arrive at an all-encompassing definition of *indigenismo*, this introduction will seek to explore the implications of *indigenismo* within Post-Revolutionary Mexico and how Modotti’s perception of that movement differs from, or complements, others’ views.

Tina Modotti and *Indigenismo*

Modotti’s views of *indigenismo* and the artistic techniques she used to portray indigenous culture were profoundly and primarily affected by the muralist Diego Rivera. When Modotti and Weston initially arrived in Mexico, Modotti was especially anxious to see the murals that Rivera was working on at the Ministry of Public Education. She was awestruck by the work that he was doing and was especially impressed with the respectful way he depicted the common man and, in particular, the indigenous people of Mexico, “toiling in fine comradeship” (Albers, *Shadows* 118). Over the course of the next several years Modotti observed Rivera as he worked on the murals, and at times she would even stand in as one of his models. Throughout these interactions, Modotti was undoubtedly tutored by the artist in areas pertaining to art and social and political concerns. Rivera believed, as he states in his autobiography, that “before the coming of the Spaniards, the Mexican Indian artists had shown great force and genius.” He continues, “Like all first-rate art, their work had been intensely local: related to the soil, the landscape, the forms, animals, deities, and colors of their own world. Above all, it had been emotion-centered. It was moulded by their hopes, fears, joys superstitions, and sufferings” (Rivera and March 43). Rivera believed that the highest forms of art in Mexico and the works

that really defined the country were done by their ancient predecessors. That art, however, had somehow become corrupted during the colonial period (Rivera and March 43-44). And Rivera was determined to depict his version of indigenous culture and society prior to the untainted period of Spanish rule. It was this education that Modotti likely received from the muralist that would influence her philosophies of *indigenismo*, which centered on Rivera's celebration of what he perceived to be an idyllic, Marxist, egalitarian indigenous society. Rivera's murals and his depictions of those groups must have been part of Modotti's initial inspiration for her photographic renditions of indigenous culture and people that would continue throughout her career.

Mexico captivated Modotti almost immediately, and she always seemed to feel more at home in that country than she did in the United States where she never felt like she quite belonged (Constantine 78). Perhaps it was the artistic atmosphere that fascinated the young bohemian or the political tensions that were prevalent, but more than likely it was the humble citizens of that country whose experiences seemed to resonate with her own personal and family difficulties (Albers, *Shadows* 117). Modotti was raised in a family that struggled financially to the point that it was often challenging to have their daily needs met. Family legend has it that Modotti was even working in a factory by the time she was twelve years old in order to help support the family (Constantine 24; Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 82; Lowe 13-14). It was not uncommon at the time for young Italian girls to work in a factory. And although we don't know the extent of the Modotti family's financial challenges, we do know that Modotti witnessed—if not experienced firsthand—poverty and poor working conditions during her time in Italy and during a brief period as an Italian immigrant in Austria. Her early experience with what Leonard Folgarait calls “social disenfranchisement” and her upbringing in a “socialist-minded family” are

most likely what provided that strong connection with the Mexican lower-class and indigenous citizens early on (*Seeing Mexico* 82; Constantine 21, 24-25). She knew personally what it was like to experience social injustices, and because of her time as a member of a persecuted, racial minority in Austria, Modotti could especially empathize on a deeper level with the indigenous people of Mexico (Lowe 13).

While Modotti's naturally sympathetic nature was prone to reach out to the poor and disenfranchised on an individual basis, she also believed in social change through political action. Due to the many countries in which she lived and the variety of people with whom she had close contact, Modotti was familiar with a wide range of political and social systems including socialism, democracy, capitalism and communism. Because of this, Modotti's political and social ideas are somewhat complex and not easy to tie to one specific philosophy or set of values. Even during her time in Mexico, Modotti's own ideologies changed and developed depending on the people she interacted with and the different experiences she had (Chilsen 2). It wasn't until she had spent a few years in Mexico observing the poverty and other social challenges that she felt the need to become more politically active (Argentero 60-61). By 1925, if not the previous year, Modotti started to affiliate herself with antifascism. She began to translate antifascist articles from Italian sources, some of which would eventually make their way into the magazine *El Machete*, a publication outlet for the Mexican Communist Party and the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors. Working with the artists and intellectuals from the Syndicate and *El Machete* influenced Modotti significantly in the formation of her own Marxist political ideas (Lowe 26). At this time she also began working for Red Aid, an international communist relief organization, even though it wasn't until 1927 that she officially joined the

Mexican Communist Party (Albers, *Shadows* 144; Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 84; Constantine 93; Albers, “Tina Modotti” 28).

Even though many scholars, intellectuals and even friends of the photographer have tried to assign a specific political party or set of beliefs to her, Modotti successfully evades such a simplistic categorization of her political ideology. Even as late as 1929 at the time of Julio Mella’s death, a pivotal moment in Modotti’s life, *La Prensa* claimed that her political affiliation was “anti-fascism with a tinge of socialism” (Albers, *Shadows* 216). Carleton Beals, a friend of Modotti’s, at one time even questioned her allegiances to communism despite her work with the Mexican Communist Party over the course of several years (Albers, *Shadows* 216). In 1925 Modotti called herself an antifascist while simultaneously associating with the communist party. Although the two political philosophies aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive, it does show the complexity of Modotti’s own political practices. At the time she stated why she considered herself to be antifascist: “I am an enemy of tyrannies. . . . But especially of the one which reigns in my country where the humble people are experiencing deplorable conditions. I believe that one should work for the progress of that humble class and its attainment of a better place in life” (qtd in Albers, *Shadows* 144). While it is difficult to distinguish Modotti’s official political affiliation, we can see from this quote that she expresses her commitment to the masses, the working class and the marginalized. It seems that her concern politically and artistically was primarily aimed at a better and perhaps more egalitarian life for all overlooked individuals.

As Modotti was rather engaged in political and social affairs during her time in Mexico, she regularly associated with many of the well-known artists and intellectuals of the day. But she was perhaps one of the few that came from a more proletariat upbringing (Constantine 76). Rivera, Siqueiros, Anita Brenner and others all came from an educated, bourgeois background.

While they sympathized with and were concerned for the rights of the lower classes, they didn't have the deeper understanding and experience that Modotti had having been raised in poorer conditions and having spent most of her life as a minority in countries that weren't her own. Letizia Argentero writes that Modotti "identified with the silence of the people" and showed "the hope of the oppressed" through her photography (131-32). Mildred Constantine asserts that Modotti made "visible the humility, simplicity, solitude and fortitude of the Mexican people" through her "quiet comprehension of all suffering" (93). The more Modotti became committed to the liberation of the masses, the more she tried to reflect them in her photography without demeaning or patronizing them. Rather, the individuals that Modotti depicts are represented in a respectful way that Pasquale Verdicchio describes as one that "[marks] the historical presence of subjects to whom it had been denied or made inaccessible" (i). Modotti doesn't just capture the physical appearance of these people; she provides them with a way to be recognized as part of the larger Mexican culture. Rivera and some of the other artists in Post-Revolutionary Mexico also tried to celebrate indigenous individuals by simply representing them artistically in prominent locations. However, Modotti seems to do it in a way that is more authentic and genuine. Rather than removing them from their cultural setting or portraying them in a manner that is a fabrication of their society and even their physical appearance—like Rivera—she attempts to give a more objective and honest representation. This is due partly to the nature of the photographic medium which lends itself better to a more realistic depiction, but it is also based on the fact that Modotti identified with these people. While Modotti's representations, perhaps, aren't as accurate and honest as they would have been if they were done by an actual indigenous individual, they are better than the overly-exaggerated works that had come before her. Additionally, Modotti's purposes behind her images were weren't solely for economic or

personal gain. She also used her photographs in an effort to affect a social change for those groups.

In the years following the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the focus throughout Mexico shifted toward the indigenous people of the country who seemed to have been forgotten politically, educationally, artistically and culturally. Many saw *indigenismo* and a return to indigenous culture and ideals as a means of rebuilding Mexico. It appeared to be a way to establish a new identity that was authentically Mexican and distinct from the perceived corruption of Europe and North America. While Modotti loved Mexico and felt at home there, she was not as concerned about national matters as were some of her Mexican colleagues, and the purpose of her *indigenismo* was not to bolster Mexican nationalism. These groups of impoverished and overlooked indigenous communities, rather, seemed to be the epitome of the people to whom she had expressed her political and artistic commitment. Artists and intellectuals like Rivera, Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco and José Vasconcelos certainly informed Modotti's opinions of *indigenismo*. However, she wasn't as interested in their advocacy for building a new, Mexican society as she was in promoting social equality among all races and groups of people in the country, similar to what international Marxism endorsed.

Indigenismo to Modotti was more of a way to give voice to the marginalized group of indigenous people. John Mraz describes best the overall feel of Modotti's work when he states that there is "a feeling of social integration . . . a world in which all have their places" (qtd. in Albers, "Tina Modotti" 40). Patricia Albers affirms that this feeling of "social integration" that Modotti posited in her photographs "must have been inseparable from the observations that indigenous societies were grounded in communal life and that culture was as much the affair of the vegetable seller in the market as of the musician in the local *zócalo* (town square)" ("Tina

Modotti” 40). Similar to Rivera, her mentor, Modotti was impressed with indigenous societies and the sense of a unified community that she observed in them. To her it seemed that everyone had a place, and that everyone was an equal.

Like many at the time who professed belief in Marxist ideas, Modotti had a limited understanding of that ideology and other communist viewpoints that encouraged the formation of classless communities (Albers, *Shadows* 178). She was so impressed, however, with what she understood of Marxism that by 1927 when Manuel Alvarez Bravo came to visit her studio, he recalled that she had painted some of Lenin’s and Marx’s phrases all over the walls. Folgarait notes that “the studio itself became a propaganda space, not for the general public, but for a solitary artist absorbing certain communist mantras.” He continues, “Her decision to bring communist scripture into the space where final adjustments to prints were made is enough to convince us that she herself was convinced, in the years between 1927 and 1929, that her art and her politics were formed with the same breath” (*Seeing Mexico* 90). While Modotti can’t be considered a political authority on Marxism, I argue that she did understand and believe in the Marxist ideal of an egalitarian society and the notion of increased activism by the masses that she learned from Rivera. More than likely, neither Modotti nor Rivera had a very good understanding of the movement, and it is possible that they over-idealized communist philosophies and only used specific aspects of the theory that suited their purposes. However, we do know that Rivera had a high regard for Trotsky and even had pictures of the Russian on the walls of his bedroom. Mella also admired Trotsky and was even threatened with expulsion from the communist party (which was primarily influenced by Stalinism) for sympathizing his ideals (Argentero 117, 124). As both Rivera and Mella were intimately connected with Modotti,

we can infer that Modotti felt similarly. She did sympathize with the masses, and through her art she encouraged and portrayed classless societies.

The Mexican Revolution and the “New” Mexico

In order to understand Modotti’s philosophy of *indigenismo*, it is necessary to comprehend the historical and cultural context in which her ideology developed. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 brought to an end the nearly four-decade dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Although Mexico had been an independent nation, free from Spanish domination for almost a century by the start of the Revolution, the country was still recovering from centuries of oppression by the Spanish government, internal dictators and local *caciques*. Since the arrival of the Spaniards, led by Hernán Cortés, in the sixteenth century, it had been difficult for Mexican citizens to recognize, let alone express, an entirely unique Mexican culture that wasn’t forcibly imposed on them by an external governing body and other European-centered traditions.

By the late nineteenth century, the country was starting to become more internationally recognized, and it was essential for it to create and to assert its own unique identity and history into world politics in order to be considered a modern state (Cuevas-Wolf 10). Argentero explains that even by the time Modotti and Weston had arrived in Mexico in the 1920s, the country was “still in search of institutional and political stability and, consequently, of social and economic reform” (46). With the end of the *Porfiriato*, a violent revolution, and the subsequent rebuilding of the government and national infrastructure after the war, many theorists, politicians and artists—including Manuel Gamio, José Vasconcelos, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera—attempted to generate solutions that would not only unify the nation behind a distinctive and coherent past but would enable it to compete in the modern age.

Indigenismo was seen as one solution to the unification of Mexico following the Revolution of 1910. Dolores Tierney contends that “*indigenismo* argues that the roots of modern Mexican identity lie in the cultural legacy of its pre-Columbian Indian cultures.” She continues to explain that the philosophy provided Mexican society of the time “with a ‘myth of origins’ which conveniently elided its colonial past and provided a notion of national identity and a racial ideology that broke free from the European-dependent culture” that was dominant at the turn of the century (73). The goal of *indigenismo* was to provide a method for assimilating the indigenous people into Mexican society while simultaneously developing a new, Mexican identity. Rather than appropriating European traditions and ideals into the Mexican culture, as had been done in the past, *indigenistas* believed that Mexico should reject those previous notions and, as Dawson states, adopt the Indian “both as the symbol of the national type and the object of reform” (xiv-xv). Andrea Noble argues that at the time “the ‘Indian’ was at once revered as the receptacle of authentically Mexican values, yet whose resistance to the processes of modernisation threatened to call them into question” (Noble, *Cinema* 87). Mexican intellectuals looked to the contemporary indigenous populations as the people that preserved at least a portion of the uncorrupted culture of the pre-Colonial natives (Brading 78). Those ancient people seemed to be the original, untainted Mexicans, and their character and moral qualities would serve as an antidote to the perceived corruption of European society that had afflicted the country. However, while the indigenous people were seen as the pure and noble group that would propel the nation into the twentieth century, they were also perceived to be rural and “backwards” due to their unusual cultural traditions and lack of education. Their resistance to assimilation threatened the growth of the new nation and endangered the entire country’s ability to assert itself into modern society (Brading 76).

Because it was challenging to reconcile these two facets of the Mexican indigenous population, the nation needed to identify and define the new role of the indigenous individual. This proved to be a challenging feat on multiple levels. There was not only a significant cultural and physical distance between the indigenous groups of the countryside and the more modern Mexican society found in the large urban centers, but there was also a wide range of indigenous races, cultures and languages throughout the country. Although modernization and urbanization of the Mexican state had begun with the *Porfiriato*, these differences made assimilation and full participation in Mexican society even more difficult (Noble, *Image* 15). The state could not focus on the incorporation of just one minority, indigenous culture; rather, the country was composed of dozens of indigenous groups, not to mention the *mestizo* and *creole* cultures that permeated the more urban areas (Noble, *Image* 110). If government leaders were going to unite Mexico behind one mythical origin, language and culture, a national identity would need to be established that, as Noble explains, would “cut across political and cultural practices” (*Image* 109). It would have to be an identity that would define and embrace all of its citizens.

The issue of how to assimilate indigenous individuals into modern Mexican society following the Revolution was rather complex, and as such, the concept of *indigenismo* varied from person to person. Most *indigenistas* were sympathetic, to varying degrees, to indigenous culture and people, but they did not share a unified solution for socially, educationally or economically incorporating those groups (Dawson xiv). It should be noted that a significant discrepancy in the development of *indigenismo* was that indigenous individuals, as Alan Knight explains, were “the objects, not the authors” of the theory (77). *Indigenismo* was a way for government officials and other elite groups to resolve the “Indian problem,” and while most intentions may have been good, the exclusion of the indigenous people from this process was

blatantly apparent. As it would be nearly impossible to discuss every version of *indigenismo* in 1920's Mexico, the philosophy could perhaps be divided into two basic branches of the theory's proponents. The first could be seen as represented by individuals like Gamio, Vasconcelos and Siqueiros who respected indigenous cultures but believed that those societies were regressive and no longer relevant in a modern, industrialized environment. The second branch, perhaps composed of artists and intellectuals like Rivera and Frida Kahlo, believed that indigenous languages and cultural elements should remain untouched and perhaps emulated as Mexico began to redefine itself and continued on the path to a more industrialized society. As Modotti was influenced in some way by both of these branches, I will look at both views of *indigenismo* and how Modotti's own ideas developed from their understanding of the philosophy.

Manuel Gamio

Two of the most prominent theorists and proponents of *indigenismo* following the Revolution were Manuel Gamio and José Vasconcelos. Many of their theories relating to the subject provided an indirect base for what would become Modotti's philosophy of *indigenismo*. Trained as an anthropologist by Franz Boas at Columbia University, Manuel Gamio was the individual that was primarily responsible for laying the foundation upon which *indigenismo* rested during the first few decades of the twentieth century in Mexico (Brading 76). Several of his convictions regarding racial differences actually came from his former professor who believed that no people or race was more esteemed in the eyes of deity than any other. Because of this belief, according to Boas, there was little purpose in establishing any type of racial hierarchy within a civilization—a practice in which some in Mexico were already engaged. Many believed that an individual's physical features and race determined where they stood on an evolutionary scale of human progress. As Caucasians had "desirable" features, they were at the

top of this hierarchy and were therefore considered the most advanced group. Indigenous people, on the other hand, were placed at the bottom and were seen as backward or underdeveloped. Using Boas's ideas as justification for his own beliefs, Gamio rejected any ideas of racial determinism that were popular at the time. He proposed the formation and unification of a Mexican state that consisted of one *mestizo* race and culture, which would mean assimilating the Indian into society while simultaneously eliminating indigenous culture (Gamio, *Forjando Patria* 38-39; Brading 79; Dawson 9).

In his well-known, 1916 book, *Forjando Patria*, Gamio not only expressed his ideas of *indigenismo* which provided a base for much of the philosophy, but he also addressed the need for the creation of a unique Mexican state based on indigenous ideals. In the introduction, he begins by referring to "the great forge of America" in which "the bronze and iron of virile races have been alloyed for centuries and centuries" (23). Gamio's metaphor becomes particularly poignant here as he is referring to the *combining* of two types of metals: a reddish-brown bronze and a light, silvery-gray iron. Gamio carefully selected metals with a specific color scheme so his intentions with *indigenismo* would not be lost to his readers. He uses the bronze to represent the indigenous races of Latin America and the iron to represent the Caucasian, European population of the continent. He continues with these symbols until the end of the introduction where he calls on all Mexicans to participate in the creation of a new, Mexican race. This appeal provides not only a thesis for *Forjando Patria* but for his entire philosophy: "It is now the task of the revolutionaries of Mexico to take up the hammer and tie on the apron of the forger to make a new *patria* of intermixed iron and bronze surge from the miraculous anvil. There is the iron. . . . There is the bronze. . . . Stir, brothers!" (24). Like other *indigenistas* Gamio recognized that the native populations were not only necessary, but integral in the formation of a new *patria*, a new

state. However, he also believed that indigenous societies were essential only insofar as they blended with the rest of the Mexican population both culturally and racially (Brading 82).

In another one of his works, *La población del valle de Teotihuacán*⁷, he directly asserts his position on the integration of indigenous people into society. While Gamio recognizes the unique nature of indigenous art and life, he also shares his vision of what he sees as the future for the indigenous people of Mexico:

La extensión e intensidad que presenta la vida folk-lórica en la gran mayoría de la población, demuestra de modo elocuente el retraso cultural en que vegeta la misma. Curiosa, atractiva y original es esa vida arcaica que se desliza entre artificios, espejismos y supersticiones; mas en todos sentidos sería preferible para los habitantes estar incorporados a la civilización contemporánea de avanzadas ideas modernas, que, aun cuando desprovistas de fantasía y de sugestivo ropaje tradicional, contribuyen a conquistar de manera positiva el bienestar material e intelectual a que aspira sin cesar la humanidad. (Gamio, La población lii)

Gamio's primary objective was the cultural assimilation of indigenous people. He believed that in order to create "a powerful *patria* and a coherent and defined nationality," it would be necessary to have the "fusion of races, convergence and fusion of manifestations of culture, linguistic unification, and the economic equilibrium of social elements" (*Forjando Patria* 164). For Gamio, the future of Mexico rested upon the success of *mestizaje*, the cultural if not genetic mixing between those of indigenous and Hispanic/European origin. The preservation of indigenous cultures and languages was seen by Gamio as an obstacle to *mestizaje* and the modernization of the Mexican state, and, as such, he proposed that it should be left behind.

⁷Edited by Gamio, *La población del valle de Teotihuacán* was a compilation of anthropological and archaeological research done in that valley by Gamio's team of researchers.

José Vasconcelos

Another significant figure that shaped 1920's views of *indigenismo* was José Vasconcelos, the first Minister of Education. He could be considered the person most credited with putting the concept of *indigenismo* into practice both artistically and educationally in Post-Revolutionary Mexico through his commissioning of the muralists and his educational reforms. Vasconcelos's 1925 essay, "*La raza cosmica*," is well-known for its ideas that, like Gamio's, endorsed the creation of a "new race" made out of a conglomeration of races and cultures. He believed that "*el fin ulterior de la Historia . . . es lograr la fusión de los pueblos y las culturas*" (64). It was his opinion that this "cosmic race" would not only change the future of Mexico and the rest of Latin America, but it was an ideal that the whole world should aspire to. He considered it the responsibility of those on the American continents to pave the way for a more culturally and racially unified human family. He states:

El objeto del continente nuevo y antiguo es mucho más importante. Su predestinación obedece al designio de constituir la cuna de una raza quinta en la que se fundirán todos los pueblos, para reemplazar a las cuatro que aisladamente han venido forjando la Historia. En el suelo de América hallará término la dispersión, allí se consumará la unidad por el triunfo del amor fecundo, y la superación de todas las estirpes. (65)

For Vasconcelos, Gamio and others the goal of *indigenismo*, according to David Brading, was "a means to an end rather than an enduring mission: if incorporation was its aim, then essentially it sought to destroy rather than fortify the peasant culture of native communities" (77). If Gamio and Vasconcelos had their way, ultimately, Mexico would become one *mestizo* race that Knight calls "the ideological symbol of the new regime" (86). The new *mestizo*-ized Mexican would

thus stand as the unifying and redeeming result of the recently revolutionized Mexico. Noble, however, summarizes the implications behind this *mestizaje*:

The move to instate *mestizo* identity is a double-edged gesture, an act of both rejection and incorporation. *Mestizo* identity is established through the delimitation of boundaries: *mestizo* identity excludes that which is primitive and backward in Indian culture (that which would mean that the Indian would *degenerate* into a beast of burden); it includes that which is 'positive' (folkloric expression). (*Image* 120-21)

Brading explains that the principles of *indigenismo* were paradoxical in that proponents—including Gamio and Vasconcelos—believed in incorporating elements of indigenous culture into the new Mexican identity, but they also believed that the only way to re-create the country was by “[destroying] the native culture which had emerged during the colonial period” (88). So while Gamio and Vasconcelos lauded and encouraged the incorporation of certain indigenous elements and folk art into Mexican culture and society, they also believed that indigenous individuals should become part of the state. The only way that that could be done fully would be through the dissolution of indigenous cultural elements.

Los Tres Grandes and the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors

As politicians, intellectuals and artists looked more toward *indigenismo* and incorporated indigenous characteristics into their work, their political policies and art became a vehicle for creating not only a new, Mexican culture but a new role for indigenous people as well (Dawson xv). Both Gamio and Vasconcelos agreed that the best way to achieve the objective of a restructured national identity and to educate the country on the value of a homogenized nation was through the arts. They specifically sought for art and artists that could impart a didactic message to all Mexican citizens, the majority of whom were uneducated and illiterate. The

medium would also need to lend itself well to telling the story of Mexico's history—whether genuine or fabricated—so that the public could buy into it as something that was uniquely their own. By appropriating the folk art and history of indigenous culture into this new ideal, the *indigenistas* believed that they would be creating something that was exclusively Mexican, but at the same time it would require the cooperation and sustainable belief of the people at large for this newly created history to take hold. In *Forjando Patria* Gamio encouraged a return to, and a new appreciation for, pre-Columbian art and artifacts (Braun 188). In the coming decades others, including Emilio Fernández and Gabriel Figueroa, would use film to promote these new ideals proposed by government officials. And still others, like Juan Rulfo and Rosario Castellanos, would write and create art that was even anti the government's racial and cultural assimilation of indigenous cultures. However, the medium that was most integral in the definition and re-creation of the new, Mexican state was the *muralista* program, directed primarily by Vasconcelos beginning in 1921.

As the Minister of Education, Vasconcelos initiated the *muralista* program, which was intended to be one of the foremost methods in educating the masses about Mexican history and culture based on a nationalistic ideology (Noble, *Image* 16). Although several artists participated in this program, the project was primarily dominated by “*Los Tres Grandes*”: José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera. While Modotti was undoubtedly familiar with the programs and initiatives of Vasconcelos, in particular, it was from these three individuals, and principally Diego Rivera, that Modotti acquired her ideas about *indigenismo*—even though their theories of *indigenismo* were based profoundly on Vasconcelos's notion of the concept. Vasconcelos, Siqueiros and Orozco more heavily promoted the formation of a *mestizo* race; whereas, Rivera and Modotti preferred that indigenous people be integrated into

contemporary Mexican society while still keeping their own customs and culture intact.

Working with all of the muralists, however, provided Modotti with a fundamental part of her artistic and political development during her time in Mexico (Chilsen 4).

Through her work at *Mexican Folkways*⁸ and *El Machete*, Modotti had the opportunity to work closely with both Orozco and Siqueiros, and all three of them shared a mutual belief insofar as the purpose of their art was concerned. All believed that art could not, nor should it be, separated from political or social issues, a connection which Siqueiros often described as the idea of “*el socializar el arte*” (Argentero 50-51). For these individuals the purpose of art was didactic in nature, but it also needed to be an impetus for significant social change, particularly on behalf of those who were oppressed and overlooked in society. Although Modotti worked with Orozco, her political and social ideologies perhaps more closely resembled those of Rivera and to some extent Siqueiros. Orozco was interested in the pre-Columbian, indigenous culture and past, and he respected indigenous people as members of humanity. However, he believed that Mexico could only progress when race was no longer a political issue due to equality among the various ethnic groups in Mexico (Orozco 108). In an originally un-published manuscript by Orozco that Jean Charlot includes in his book on the Mexican muralists, Orozco’s disapproval of contemporary indigenous society is obvious. He not only categorizes the use of “folk” or indigenous art as a poor practice, but he also condemns the natives themselves:

True nationalism cannot reside in this or that theatrical wardrobe, in this or that folk song of most doubtful worth, but rather in our scientific, industrial, or artistic contribution to civilization at large. . . . Such thoughts led me to eschew once and for all the painting of Indian sandals and dirty clothes. From the bottom of my heart I do wish that those who

⁸ *Mexican Folkways* was a publication that celebrated indigenous culture and folk art and was considered a means to help unify the country. Contributors included Rivera, Modotti, Jean Charlot, Carlton Beals, Manuel Gamio, and Anita Brenner (Braun 190).

wear them would discard such outfits and get civilized. But to glorify them would be like glorifying illiteracy, drunkenness, or the mounds of garbage that “beautify” our streets, and that I refuse to do. (227)

Orozco held the continuation of indigenous cultural practices in contempt and believed that the country’s progression relied upon the abandonment of these elements.

Like Orozco, Siqueiros promoted the recognition of indigenous people in Mexico and wanted equal rights afforded them, but it was not with the intent that their culture should become a part of the new, Mexican identity. Understanding, however, the importance of native art and history, Siqueiros saw indigenous art as a model for a higher mode of artistic expression—socialist art. He believed that indigenous people served as a model for a truly communal society through their art and manner of living. By looking to that aspect of their culture, Mexico could become a more unified, *mestizo* state (Braun 187-88). Although Rivera and Modotti also looked to the indigenous people of Mexico as a representation of a Marxist-egalitarian community, they did not believe, like Siqueiros did, that their culture should be abandoned in favor of a *mestizo*-ized nation.

In 1922 Siqueiros, Rivera and another Post-Revolutionary artist, Xavier Guerrero, founded the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors, a group of individuals striving together for a revolutionary state. The Syndicate eventually launched the weekly magazine *El Machete*, and in the first issue it published its official manifesto which stated the aims of the group specifically and to a certain extent the goals of the Mexican Communist Party in general. While Modotti was not in Mexico at the time of the formation of the Syndicate or the publication of the manifesto, she eventually became familiar with the viewpoints of group members and came to share some of their same opinions. Written by Siqueiros the manifesto

stated that the group wanted to recognize and help the marginalized, and that it was directed “to the native races humiliated for centuries; to the soldiers made into hangmen by their officers; to the workers and peasants scourged by the rich; and to the intellectuals who do not flatter the bourgeoisie” (24). What is particularly interesting and of note in this manifesto is how Siqueiros describes the Syndicate’s position—and his as well—towards indigenous people specifically. He states:

The noble work of our race, down to its most insignificant spiritual and physical expressions, is native (and essentially Indian) in origin. With their admirable and extraordinary talent *to create beauty, peculiar to themselves, the art of the Mexican people is the most wholesome spiritual expression in the world* and this tradition is our greatest treasure. Great because it belongs collectively to the people and this is why our fundamental aesthetic goal must be to socialise artistic expression and wipe out bourgeois individualism. (24-25)

Siqueiros believed that Mexican identity and culture should be grounded in the art and history of the pre-Columbian, indigenous past in order to step into the future. The indigenous people and culture, however, only provide a foundation for Siqueiros’s greater goal of a socialist society that would eliminate the individual and individual cultures for the greater good.

Before leaving the discussion of the Syndicate entirely, it would be negligent not to mention the profound impact that another founding member of the group and a communist, Xavier Guerrero, had on both Modotti and Rivera. Although the romantic relationship between Guerrero and Modotti was different from that of the working relationship of the two men (Guerrero was Rivera’s apprentice), Guerrero was significant in the development of both Modotti and Rivera’s communist and *indigenista* views (Braun 187; Hamil 89). While it is

unclear the precise effect Guerrero had on Diego Rivera, we do know that he was intimately involved with Rivera as he worked on the Ministry of Public Education murals. He undoubtedly expressed some opinions on *indigenismo* and the direction of Mexico at large which impacted Rivera. During this time Guerrero also shared communist ideals with Rivera, and they became comrades as Rivera eventually joined the communist party.

Along with his commitment to the Mexican Communist Party, Guerrero was particularly concerned for the treatment and the living conditions of Mexican indigenous people and the impoverished population in general. We know that he traveled extensively among the indigenous groups of Mexico and at times even ate and slept like they did, and while we are unsure if Modotti ever accompanied him on his travels, we do know that he shared pictures of some of the people with her and spoke of the effects of a “classless society” that he observed among them (Albers, *Shadows* 171-72). Guerrero’s and Modotti’s discussions of these experiences and observations helped to enhance Modotti’s dedication to the poor and to the indigenous people of Mexico. Modotti credited Guerrero for the role he played in her development. In a 1929 letter to him she stated, “Tú fuiste quien me abrió los ojos, tú fuiste el que me ayudaste en los momentos cuando sentía bajo mis pies había el puntal de mis vieja creencias” (qtd. in “Tina Modotti ante el juez penal” 4). Because of Guerrero, Modotti began to be fascinated by the seemingly egalitarian nature of these communities where no member of the group was regarded above or below another.

Diego Rivera

While Modotti was influenced by the Syndicate and certainly shared some of the group’s beliefs as they related to the importance of indigenous culture, her position did not advocate the dissolution of the culture in favor of a homogenous, *mestizo* society. In this regard, Modotti’s

views seem to be more in harmony with Rivera's position as it related to indigenous matters. In order to understand Rivera's *indigenista* philosophies, it is essential to be familiar with how his ideas developed. Although Rivera was born and grew up in Mexico, at the encouragement of his teacher, the well-known Dr. Atl, he spent the early years of his career studying and working in Europe with Picasso, Modigliani and other well-known artists of the day. Except for a brief visit to Mexico in 1910, just after Porfirio Díaz had been re-elected to office, Rivera would not return to the country until 1921, after the Revolution had ended. Even though he would argue later that he was an active participant in the Revolution and had believed in those ideals from a young age, Rivera seems to have cared little, if at all, about Mexican national affairs during his time abroad (Hamil 28).

Just as Rivera had limited involvement with the Revolution, he also did not concern himself much with political matters while in Europe. Rivera was a well-known Marxist and communist throughout most of his life, but it wasn't until his return to Mexico in the early 1920s that he became a man of strong political conviction. As Pete Hamil notes, "The emergence of Rivera as a communist was quite sudden" (90). During his many years in Europe he didn't have much to say about his political beliefs, but based on his long-time relationship with the Russian Angelina Beloff, it is certain that Rivera was at least somewhat familiar with the theory of Marxism. When he returned to Mexico he almost immediately began to interact with many young, strong-minded communists, like Guerrero, and as Rivera's theories of art began to grow, so did his understanding of and passion for Marxism (Hamil 90, 93). Like Siqueiros, Rivera eventually maintained the opinion that by expressing his Marxist views through art, his work could then become a catalyst for the rebirth of the nation and an increased sense of nationalism throughout the country (Braun 187). Differing from Siqueiros, however, Rivera came to believe

that true Marxism—or at least the undefiled precursor to Marxism—was already apparent in indigenous culture and society. Rather than destroying that culture via some *mestizo* race, he thought that Mexicans should emulate *them* to a degree and return to their indigenous roots.

It wasn't until after Rivera had learned that Vasconcelos and other government officials were recruiting artists to be part of a *muralista* project that he returned to Mexico (Hamil 28). At this time, however, he was still not quite the communist *indigenista* that was to paint the landmark murals at the Ministry of Public Education and the National Palace. In fact, Vasconcelos described the recently returned Rivera as “*un pintor afrancesado que no conocía nada de su país*” (Orozco Vallardes⁹ 111). In order for him to create murals that would become the central teaching tool of Mexico's national identity, he needed to be reminded of his heritage.

In the years 1921 and 1922, at the request and occasionally in the company of Vasconcelos, Rivera took two trips that were to become pivotal events in his life and in the future of his artwork. The first trip was to the Yucatán at the end of 1921, and the second was to Tehuantepec—a town in Vasconcelos's home state of Oaxaca—in 1922. During his time in the Yucatán, Rivera came in contact with the *ligas de resistencia* (leagues of resistance) led by the socialist governor Felipe Carillo Puerto who in the revolutionary spirit had just liberated the *campesinos* from their servitude on the surrounding plantations (Craven 68; Marnham 160; Folgarait, *Mural Painting* 38). The uprising of these proletariat workers and his contact with the socialist governor inspired Rivera, and in the process of recognizing the unfair treatment of impoverished and indigenous citizens in the area, his political ideologies began to change as a result. At the same time Rivera was affected by the social movements he observed in the Yucatán, he was also stirred by the ancient Maya sites of Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. Vasconcelos watched Rivera's interest in pre-Columbian art and architecture grow throughout the trip as the

⁹ See Rodríguez interview section.

artist filled dozens of sketchbooks with his reproductions of the ancient artifacts (Marnham 161; Hamil 84).

Although Rivera's encounters with indigenous culture and people in the Yucatán proved to be significant for the direction of his career, it was his trip to the small community of Tehuantepec that could be seen as even more influential on the artist. He was not only entranced by the primitive jungle setting, but he was especially impressed by the dark Tehuana women who in many ways dominated society, and who appeared to be defined by unity and a sense of community. Captivated by what he viewed as a matriarchal Tehuantepec, Rivera would not only return to the area many times throughout the course of his career, but he would continually refer to the sketches he made during that initial visit as he worked on his murals. In fact, many of the women, events and jungle locations that are seen on the walls of the Ministry of Public Education and the National Palace are based on his original perceptions of Tehuana women and culture (Hamil 84; Marnham 166).

While he was in Tehuantepec Rivera began a study later entitled, *The Bather of Tehuantepec* (1923), which depicts a nude woman from the waist up bathing in a jungle river. Patrick Marnham describes the main features of this woman: "Rivera was to make the chunky figure of the Indian woman, the natural simplicity of her gestures, the harmony of fleshy leaves and plump, rounded torso, the fusion of human, mineral and vegetable" (166). These characteristics, in addition to the dark brown skin and black hair, became some of the predominant features of the indigenous women he would depict throughout his career. Marnham notes that *The Bather of Tehuantepec* is the beginning of Rivera's development of his "style." He also observes that traces of this Tehuana even appear in the muralist's later San Francisco works done in 1940 and in some of his last frescoes done in Mexico City in 1951 (166). This

study is also when Rivera starts to become interested in the female nude form. Marnham argues that the Tehuanas “unlocked Rivera’s response to the beauty of the nude.” He continues:

The visual fusion he achieved in this painting grew from the emotional fusion he experienced in observing the Indian union of sensuality and innocence. They offered him a central, new subject, the naked female form, merely by following their daily routine of washing, confident and trusting and heedless of strangers, in a forest stream. (167)

For Rivera the Tehuanas were identified by their beautiful, sensuous and exotic bodies, and it was this inherent beauty that he would later use to define the indigenous population of Mexico and Mexicans in general.

Almost immediately following Rivera’s return from Tehuantepec, we see the Tehuana traits—Rivera’s new “style”—start to appear in many of his murals, including *The Virgin Earth* (Figure 1). Modotti herself modeled as the central figure for this mural, and Rivera’s portrayal of the photographer epitomizes his version of the indigenous, Tehuana woman that Marnham describes. She is shown as rounded and chunky, particularly around the mid-section. It is as if she has become part of the earth and the plant life around her. The shape of her body mirrors the terrain as the simple gesture of her hand reaches out to touch the small plant, more fully integrating herself into her surroundings. Rivera even takes care with the title of the piece, *The Virgin Earth*, which shows the inherent connection between the woman and Mother Nature.

Rivera wasn’t just impressed by the sensuality and dark beauty of the indigenous people that he observed in Tehuantepec and the Yucatán. He was also interested in the fact that these societies seemed to be built according to a community structure where social equality was prevalent. In Rivera’s view, they were the ideal predecessors to Marxism. At the same time Rivera’s ideas on *indigenismo* were formulating, his political ideologies began to take shape as



Figure 1 Diego Rivera, *The Virgin Earth*, 1926
In ARTstor. 30 August 2011; Available from ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York

well until his views of *indigenismo* became inextricably linked to his Marxist philosophies. It should be noted, however, that while Rivera observed what he believed to be an idyllic, Marxist community in the indigenous groups of Mexico, the depictions of indigenous society

that appeared on his murals were his idealized creations. He was fascinated with indigenous—and especially Aztec—culture, but he notoriously overlooked the fact that historically these societies were not as egalitarian as he led people to believe. Power struggles and rigid class boundaries abounded in these societies. Rivera purposely decontextualized their history in many ways by perpetrating the myth that they were indeed formed according to classless, social structures (Braun 241).

As he traveled around Mexico in search of material that could be used to redefine Mexico, Rivera admits in his autobiography: “It was my desire to reproduce the pure, basic images in my land. I wanted my paintings to reflect the social life of Mexico as *I saw it, and through my vision of the truth*, to show the masses the outline of the future” (Rivera and March 134, emphasis added). In this statement Rivera recognizes that through his murals he wanted to create a past

and future of Mexico that would be taught to and ingrained in all Mexicans. But perhaps more importantly, Rivera also acknowledges that this depiction of Mexico is specifically his—as accurate or inaccurate as it may be. Also noting Rivera’s erroneous portrayal of indigenous culture, Barbara Braun points out that Rivera uses his murals as “an explicit sign of political affiliation to promote explicitly revolutionary purposes,” and he employs them “to construct a mythic past whose effectiveness could be experienced in the present” (186). While Rivera’s murals were intended to teach Mexicans about their past, the incorporation of indigenous cultural elements was also to thrust the country into a future defined by his understanding of Marxism. However, the foundation of all of this was based on a depiction of Mexico that Rivera had invented and one that he intended to use for conveying his own political and social agenda in a very public venue.

After Rivera returned to Mexico City from his trip to the Yucatán and Tehuantepec, he began his work at the Ministry of Public Education. These murals marked a new phase in Rivera’s artistic career as he began to explore more revolutionary themes. He also developed a visual indigenous “type” that would influence how native peoples were viewed in Mexico and throughout the world. It was while Rivera was working on the Ministry murals that he met Modotti and Weston in 1923. The three artists quickly became friends, and this encounter marked the beginning of a personal and artistic relationship between Modotti and Rivera (Albers, *Shadows* 118). Rivera would be the one primarily responsible for introducing Modotti and Weston to some of the artistic and intellectual elite of the day, and it seemed that the two foreigners fit in, almost immediately, with this group. Modotti and Weston’s 1923 New Year’s Eve party even initiated a weekly event for artists, intellectuals and writers to gather in the couple’s home and share political, philosophical and artistic ideas. As the meetings of “the

family” (the name the group affectionately referred to themselves as) continued, Modotti and Rivera became better friends and began to mutually influence each other (Albers, *Shadows* 127-28).

By the end of 1925, Rivera and Modotti were spending a lot of time together as Modotti began going back and forth sporadically between Mexico City and Chapingo where Rivera was working on a new series of murals at the National School of Agriculture (Albers, *Shadows* 152). She went to observe Rivera’s art in action, but by the end of 1925 Rivera began using Modotti as a model for some of his works in that location which included: *The Virgin Earth*, *Germination*, *Subterranean Forces* and others (Hamil 124). She also started photographing his murals that would appear in national and international publications. During this time Modotti and Rivera, more than likely, would have conversed freely about political and artistic philosophies, and Modotti would have had the opportunity to question Rivera and understand more fully his perception of indigenous culture and people. While the interaction between Rivera and Modotti increased, so did their attachment sexually as the couple began having an affair by late 1926. It doesn’t appear that the couple ever fell in love with each other, but this affair did ultimately lead to the dissolution of Rivera’s marriage with Lupe Marin after Marin sent an embittered and jealous letter to Modotti who quickly ended the affair (Albers, *Shadows* 169-70; Argentero 87-88; Marnham 197-99; Hamil 124-26).

Although Modotti and Rivera became more involved on a personal level, it was his artwork that seemed to have a more profound effect on the development of the young photographer’s artistic identity. Rivera contributed to her education of Marxism and indigenous culture as he developed his own methods for portraying these ideals artistically. The kind of proto-Marxist egalitarianism that Rivera saw in indigenous communities is shown throughout his

works, including *Flower Festival* (1923-1924), which depicts the flower festival of Santa Anita celebrated on the floating islands of Xochimilco. In this mural Rivera creates an almost paradisiacal setting that combines the waterways and jungle trees of Xochimilco with this model, indigenous culture and society. Here we see a large group of indigenous people wearing the traditional clothing of the culture, clothing which became a stereotypical, Post-Revolutionary symbol of indigenous society because of Rivera's continual depictions of it. The men wear the customary white cotton clothing and sombreros, and the women are seen with their long, dark hair in the traditional skirt and simple blouse. Rivera shows these individuals working together and helping each other prepare for the celebration. His representation of these people excludes individualistic features and demonstrates a seemingly perfect harmony among them, which serves to reinforce his version of a Marxist community.

In the same mural we even see how Rivera, created a physical type for the "new" indigenous individual based on sketches he had done of the Tehuanas, ancient Aztec stone sculptures and other pre-Columbian artifacts (Braun 191-93, 196, 241). First, in *Flower Festival* Rivera incorporates his interpretation of the Aztecs' physical features into those of the people depicted in the mural, features which Braun describes as "broad, flat heads and cheeks; low foreheads; snub noses; short necks; [and] rounded, gently stooping shoulders" (191). These characteristics are shown predominantly on the women in the foreground of the mural, as they are the only ones facing the viewer. Their broad cheeks and flat noses sharply contrast with the anglicized woman in the mural whose nose is more delicate and cheeks are slightly more rounded. Additionally, Rivera continues his reference to Aztec culture through his use of the flowers and the headbands that the indigenous women wear, both characteristics of the Aztec fertility goddess who was an integral part in harvest festivals (Braun 193). While the indigenous

women in this mural are depicted fully clothed in a traditional style, many times throughout his works he exaggerated them as sensual and beautiful exotics as seen in *The Bather of Tehuantepec* and *The Virgin Earth*. Ironically through *Flower Festival* and other murals, Rivera portrayed a people that had been historically overlooked in an effort to give them a voice, but he created a history that perhaps represented himself more than them, there, by silencing what little voice they had.

Another detail that Rivera uses in *Flower Festival* and throughout his other works to separate indigenous people is his portrayal of their wardrobe. Rivera chooses to depict the indigenous men in white cotton clothing and wearing large sombreros. The repetitive nature of this attire is visible in the mural and creates a homogenous view of the people of Xochimilco. Throughout his career Rivera continued to use the same stereotype in order to make the indigenous individual easily recognizable, and it even appears again in one of his more politically focused works, *Distribution of Arms* (Figure 2). In this mural Rivera touches on Mexican revolutionary and communist ideals as he concerns himself with the rights of the workers, *campesinos* and indigenous peoples in what Hamil calls a “glorious solidarity” (116). Just as the urban workers are all portrayed and easily identifiable in their blue clothing, the reference to the indigenous community is obvious in the right background of the painting as they are seen wearing the white cotton clothing and sombreros (Hamil 116). Rivera also depicts in this mural many of the Mexican elite of the time including himself, Frida Kahlo and even Tina Modotti in the right foreground handing arms to Julio Mella, the Cuban communist and revolutionary fighter. Through their actions and the obvious red, communist star on their chest, Rivera shows that these intellectual and artistic elite are on the side of the proletariat and are



Figure 2 Diego Rivera, Court of Festivals. 3rd floor, Arsenal, or *Distribution of Arms*, 1928
In ARTstor. 30 August 2011; Available from ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York

promoting a classless society. Rivera uses clothing to recall to the viewer the ideals of the Revolution and the power he believes that can be found in Marxist societies.

While oftentimes Rivera's portrayals of indigenous people were misdirected or exaggerated, he did not believe in suppressing their culture. In reality, Rivera admired indigenous culture, and he created a view of indigenous society that was idealized and glorified in a partial effort to commend them as an inspiration to other Mexicans. He respected the traditional lifestyles of the Tehuana women who he saw as rejecting modernization and the Europhilic traditions that had become so entrenched in Mexico for centuries (Braun 234;

Marnham 304; Craven 75). But Albers synthesizes the crux of Rivera's fascination with these indigenous cultures. She observes that through his murals the artist depicted "ordinary people toiling in fine comradeship" (*Shadows* 118). Rivera liked the idea of an egalitarian community that promoted the causes of every individual, and by seeing the indigenous people as espousing these ideals, he ended up romanticizing, appropriating and decontextualizing those societies in order to promote and essentially teach the masses his own political and social views (Braun 235).

Although her artistic and *indigenista* philosophies strongly resemble Rivera's, Modotti's images tend to portray a more genuine and less-fabricated vision of indigenous people and culture. This is not to say that Modotti never had a political or social agenda in mind while working, because as she stated, art could not be separated from the "problem of life" (Modotti, *Letters* 39-40). However, she did provide a more sympathetic and genuine vehicle for these cultures to be recognized and respected on their own terms rather than through someone else's fabricated vision of them. Throughout the next several pages I will explore how Modotti portrayed indigenous people in her early phase, which included the *Idols Behind Altars* project, her work for *Mexican Folkways* and her photography taken from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. She shows that indigenous communities should not only be considered equals with other Mexican citizens, regardless of race or background, but that they should be respected for the inherent values of equality and community they possess.

CHAPTER 1

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PHOTOGRAPHER AND *INDIGENISTA*

In 1925, after having lived in Mexico for a few years, Edward Weston returned home to California to visit his family, leaving his Mexico City studio in the care of Tina Modotti for several months. During this period of separation, Modotti was able to concentrate on her photography, and she began to become more involved in social matters. Upon Weston's return to Mexico, it became obvious that the divide between the couple that had started to develop prior to the trip seemed to have grown. While the photographers were trying to determine the direction of their relationship and their individual careers, they were both invited to display their work in an exhibition in Guadalajara (Argentero 78; Weston 128). After the exhibition the couple returned to Mexico City by train. Weston noted in his *Daybooks* that while he and his son, Brett, were seated in first class, Modotti was adamant about riding in second class, preferring to sit "in the dim light among the Indians, sprawled over each other on the hard seats, dozing or drunken or garrulous" (129). While Modotti had been sympathetic to the poorer classes prior to Weston's brief trip to the United States, it now seemed to Weston that she had gone too far by sacrificing her comfort just on principle.

Despite the developing estrangement of the couple, Modotti owed a lot to Weston who was her photographic teacher and mentor. In an interview with Raquel Tibol, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, a photographer himself and a friend of Modotti's, categorized Modotti's photographic work in Mexico in connection to her relationship with Weston. Alvarez Bravo divided her photography into two distinctive periods: the romantic and the revolutionary (Tibol 124). During her early years in Mexico and under the tutelage of Weston—what Alvarez Bravo describes as her "romantic" phase—Modotti's work primarily resembled that of her mentor's. As Alvarez

Bravo's term "romantic" could be interpreted in several different ways—not to mention that fact that it does not adequately represent Modotti's works at this time—this phase in her photography can perhaps be more accurately described as her formative period. Her art seemed to be, as Weston's was, more focused on form and composition rather than used as a medium for social change. Her pictures tended to be more abstract as she photographed flowers, pulquerías and tents. Nevertheless, the more comfortable Modotti became with herself and her own artistic ability the more she moved away from the Weston focus on aestheticism. She began to incorporate images of people and symbolic representations of the Mexican Revolution in order to evoke a change in her viewers or in governmental systems. Modotti's style became revolutionary in that through her art she began to fight for specific social and political causes. She was interested in the overlooked, the poor and those who were racially discriminated against—the indigenous—and she denounced any system or group of individuals that did not give equal treatment to all Mexicans. Throughout her revolutionary phase Modotti promoted some of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution, including the claim that equal rights should be extended to all citizens, specifically the indigenous. She admired indigenous communities, and later in her career she even emphasized them as they seemed to be organized into egalitarian units of society, something that appealed to her.

While Modotti's revolutionary phase is complex and speaks to a variety of issues that concerned her, in this chapter I am particularly interested in the evolution of Modotti from her formative years to the *indigenista* that she would eventually become. The turning point in Modotti's career can be traced back to the *Idols Behind Altars* project that she worked on with Weston during the summer of 1926. Commissioned by the American, Anita Brenner, the couple was asked to take photographs of indigenous religious and cultural art and architecture for a



Figure 3 Edward Weston, *Circus Tent*, 1924
Collection Center for Creative Photography
The University of Arizona
© 1981 Arizona Board of Regents

book Brenner was writing. Albers points out that there was a shift in Modotti's career as we compare photographs that she took during the first portion of the trip and those taken during the second. Initially, Modotti focused on religious architecture rather than on individuals and events, but by the end of the project Modotti was more inclined to photograph people and their interactions (Albers, "Tina Modotti" 36). With this change in purpose, Modotti elevated the status of indigenous groups from being a forgotten people, and she portrayed them in public settings in a way that was more

genuine and authentic than what had been done by artists before her. This chapter seeks to explore the transition between Modotti's formative and revolutionary periods as we see her focus change from abstract still lifes and architecture to the indigenous individual and community.

Abstraction

During the early phase of her career prior to the *Idols Behind Altars* tour, much of Modotti's work takes its cues from Weston's. By analyzing her photographs from these formative years we can see that not only did her style and subject matter resemble Weston's but there were many times that she even photographed the same location or objects as her more experienced mentor. Although Modotti's work is closely linked to Weston's early on in her

career, we can still see slight divergences of style and approach to a subject. Weston tended to focus more on the aesthetic, intellectual nature of a particular object. He concerned himself more with angles, line and shape and mostly avoided any sort of political or social message in his photography. Often he would decontextualize a particular image in order to enhance these



**Figure 4 Tina Modotti, *Circus Tent, Mexico, 1924*
Collection Center for Creative Photography
The University of Arizona**

formalist aspects. He believed, as he states, that “the camera should be used for a recording of *life*, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the *thing itself*, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh. . . . I shall let no chance pass to record interesting abstractions” (55).

Weston was more concerned with the object he was focusing on rather than on any implied meaning that his subject might evoke. Modotti, on the other hand, was more sentimental in her approach. While she too was concerned about space, line and composition, her photographs were often

more symbolic in nature, and she preferred to give the viewer a context for her photographs in terms of how the subject fit into normal, everyday life (Lowe 23; Albers, *Shadows* 137; Figarella 143). Additionally, Modotti’s early work frequently includes a human element that Weston’s does not. Whereas individual people might not be the main subjects of her early photographs,

she frequently includes them as a frame of reference or to make the work more relatable to the viewer.

Two photographs demonstrate these similarities and differences in tone and style in Weston and Modotti's works. In 1924 the Gran Circo Ruso was in town, and a large circus tent was erected which both Weston and

Modotti photographed. In Weston's *Circus Tent* (Figure 3) the photographer focuses primarily on the vault of the tent giving emphasis to the lines and folds in the material. Without a caption to the photograph, its abstract nature makes it difficult to decipher precisely what the viewer is looking at. Weston even describes this as his intent when he states that this picture is an "[experiment] in abstract design" (53). Likewise, Modotti maintains an element of abstraction in her photograph in that the majority of her shot



Figure 5 Edward Weston, *La Palanca*, 1926
Collection Center for Creative Photography
The University of Arizona
©1981 Arizona Board of Regents

also concentrates on the vault of the tent (Figure 4). Similar to Weston's work, Modotti's camera angle emphasizes the lines and the material of the tent, but her picture is different. The artistic elements in her photograph ultimately lead the viewer's eye to the lower, left-hand corner of the frame. Diverging from her mentor, Modotti drops the angle of her camera slightly to reveal bleachers and a few spectators. The presence of these observers not only gives us a

context in which to place Modotti's photograph—a circus or sporting event—but it also gives us an idea as to scale, thereby removing the purely abstract element that is predominant in Weston's picture (Lowe 23; Figarella 143-44). Already, Modotti's work shows her preoccupation with people as a relevant subject matter.

Comparable to the circus tent shots, the 1926 photographs that Modotti and Weston took of the *pulquería*, *La Palanca*, also reveal the priorities and styles of the photographers (Lowe 23). Weston chooses to photograph the exterior of *La Palanca* from a more abstract perspective by capturing the edge of the building and including only a small portion of the entrance and part of the building's name (Figure 5). This angle forces the viewer to notice the drawings of four individuals that are depicted on the building's façade. Weston gives us little context as to the purpose of the images and where they are located, further abstracting the *pulquería*. Modotti, on the other hand, does the same thing with her photograph of *La Palanca* (Figure 6) that she does in *Circus Tent*. She drops the angle of the camera to include a few individuals in the frame and to provide some context for the building. Like *Circus Tent* the majority of the picture is dominated by the architecture of the *pulquería*, causing us, as we do with Weston's picture, to focus on form and content. However, Modotti softens her image and makes it more relatable to the viewer by the inclusion of real people in her scene (Figarella 144).

Estridentismo

Shortly after having arrived in Mexico, Modotti became involved with two groups that profoundly influenced her political and social ideology and by extension the direction of her photography. One, which I have already discussed, was the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors founded in 1922 by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Xavier Guerrero. The other was an avant-garde movement that was introduced to the Mexican artistic



Figure 6 Tina Modotti, Exterior of Pulquería (La Palanca), Mexico, c. 1926
 gelatin silver photograph; 7 1/2 x 9 1/16" (19 x 23.1 cm)
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A., Anonymous Gift
 Digital Image ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

and literary world the year before in 1921. This movement, *Estridentismo* (Stridentism), began when Manuel Maples Arce published the group's manifesto in *Revista Actual* (Lowe 25). In the manifesto Maples Arce argues that the beauty of the twentieth century is represented in the technology of the time.

He states, "All Stridentist propaganda must praise the modern beauty of the machine" (307). He asserts that the emotions of other artistic movements—including Expressionism, Cubism, Imaginism and others—had been celebrated in the past, but "no one so far has shown any susceptibility at all to the subliminal emotions of the roadside, patchworked with wonderful billboards and geometric posters" (307). *Estridentismo* and Maples Arce—as shown in the manifesto—appropriated many of the philosophies of the Italian Futurists who rallied around the idea of a new modern aesthetic that praised and depicted technological advancements (Figarella 153). However, it also developed as a direct result of the Mexican Revolution. The *estridentistas* were a group of young adults who grew up experiencing the effects of the Revolution, but were too young to fight during the years of the conflict. They underwent

interruptions in their schoolwork, military occupations, continual political change and much social upheaval throughout their youth. Like many young adults in 1920's Mexico, they were influenced by the ideals of the Revolution, and they were fascinated with the philosophical concepts that promoted action by the masses and a rejection of a previous political and cultural regime (Rashkin 6-8). The *estridentistas* saw their non-traditional and often outrageous forms of art as catalysts for social and political change (Rashkin 8, 12). Anything that put the country and the world on a modernist track into the future and encouraged a change in the life of Mexicans was of interest to the group.

Although the *estridentistas* were not Marxist Leninists they did sympathize with socialist ideals. However, they were not solely committed to class struggle in their idea of revolution. They defined "revolution" in much broader terms rather than simply relating it to the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. They advocated anything that would break through rigid and established social structures either of a personal or collective nature (Figarella 153, 156). Mariana Figarella summarizes the main idea of *estridentismo* best when she states, "*El obrero, los sindicatos y las máquinas son considerados como el engranaje simbiótico en el que se sintetiza el avance de la vida moderna*" (156).

The *estridentista* philosophies eventually appealed to Modotti and Weston a few years later when they arrived in the country, and many of the *estridentistas*' ideologies would be the foundation for Modotti's later artistic and political work. Modotti began attending *estridentista* activities and participated in the *Teatro del Murciélagos*, the movement's attempt at a theatrical production (Rashkin 86-87,101). Although he wasn't inclined towards political discussions, Weston even had some of his works included in *estridentista* publications such as *Irradiador* and *Horizonte* (Rashkin 86-87). The couple interacted regularly with the *estridentistas* and even took

part occasionally in their events, but they never became fully involved with the group. They never signed any of the *estridentista* manifestos nor were they recognized as central figures.

However, as Elissa Rashkin states, “The photographic vision that Weston and Modotti developed



Figure 7 Tina Modotti, *Telephone Wires*, Mexico, c. 1925
palladium print; 8 15/16 x 6 5/16” (22.8 x 16.1 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A., Gift
of Miss Dorothy M. Hoskins
Digital Image ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by
SCALA/Art Resource, NY

in Mexico, a vision absolutely opposed to the then-dominant pictorial tradition, was crucial for the Stridentists and their developing visual aesthetic” (86). The photographers’ emphasis on the physical features and the beauty of modern technology helped to define and give direction to the artistic aspect of *Estridentismo*.

The movement was short-lived, only lasting from 1921-1927, and it hasn’t been until the last few decades that any scholarship has developed surrounding the group’s origins and ideologies. Interestingly enough, *Estridentismo* has gained more

attention, at least in the English- speaking world, due to the academic studies done on Modotti.

Even though she was not a main figure in the group, many of the books that have been written on her life have included at least an abbreviated section on her *estridentista* works. These

inclusions in books about Modotti have made scholars more aware of the *estridentistas* and their philosophies in general (Rashkin 1, 15). Not only did their ideologies affect her, but the writings done on her life have helped to regenerate academic interest in the movement.

One of Modotti's well-known *estridentista* photographs, *Telephone Wires* (Figure 7), reflects the group's ideals through its form and content (Flores 17). Taken from a low angle with a clear sky as a backdrop, the photograph focuses on the intersection of the vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines made by the telephone poles and cables. As opposed to her depictions of the circus tent and the *pulquería*, here Modotti excludes the human element from the picture and concentrates solely on man-made technology. Her focus on form, with some abstraction, is a reminder to the viewer of the coming of a new and more modern age characterized by technology. While this approach seems more unusual for Modotti in that she focuses mostly on composition, line and mechanized subjects, her *estridentista* photographs also provide some foresight into her later compositional techniques. The repetition of basic lines and shapes resurfaces later in Modotti's more representational and politically charged works of the late 1920s—including *Worker's Parade*, which will be discussed in the next chapter. It seems that the aesthetic and modernist training that she gleaned from the *estridentistas* worked to her advantage soon after as she blended form and composition to champion specific social and political causes (Flores 17). Like the *estridentistas* Modotti sought radical social change, and they provided a foundation for her revolutionary thought. While her art does not necessarily reflect these aims during her *estridentista* phase, the ideological training she gained from proponents of this movement does not go unnoticed as her own philosophies began to develop. Her emphasis on community and equality—specifically, indigenous communities receiving equal rights—grew as she interacted more with members of this group and the Syndicate.

Idols Behind Altars

As Modotti continued to associate with the *estridentistas* and individuals involved with the Syndicate, her political and social views further developed and diverged from Weston's. This division became more noticeable to the couple after his return from California in August 1925, and by the middle of the following year Weston and Modotti had become even more emotionally and artistically detached. Weston's work continued to be centered on abstract images, while Modotti increasingly depicted individuals and how they related to their environment (Albers, "Tina Modotti" 39). Around this same time Weston was commissioned by Anita Brenner, an American, to provide photographs for a book she was writing called *Idols Behind Altars*. Although the couple was becoming increasingly estranged, Weston still asked Modotti to assist him on the project. *Idols Behind Altars* becomes significant in that it was the last major project that Modotti and Weston collaborated on before the demise of their relationship. It also marked a turning point in Modotti's career (Argentero 85). Her art and philosophies changed as a direct result of the many interactions she had with dozens of indigenous groups. Modotti also played a crucial role during the expedition as it seems to have been mostly she that interacted with the various indigenous people of the region. Her compassionate and sympathetic nature allowed their party to get into areas and photograph things that would have been restricted otherwise (Albers, *Shadows* 158-159; Argentero 83). *Idols Behind Altars* not only provided a venue for Modotti's philosophies of *indigenismo* to solidify more deeply, but it was also a time when she began to put that philosophy into practice through her photography and interactions with indigenous individuals.

Beginning in June 1926 Modotti, Weston and Weston's fourteen-year-old son Brett traveled throughout Mexico for two months, with the first month spent in Puebla and Oaxaca and

the second month in Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato and Querétaro. During this time we see an evolution in the focus of the photographer. Modotti's photographs of Puebla and Oaxaca revolve mostly around religious architecture found in that region and are more reflective of Weston's abstract style. The second half of the expedition, however, shows an increase in photographs of indigenous people that seem to be early representations of Modotti's later, more personal approach (Albers, "Tina Modotti" 36). Albers suggests two possible reasons for the evolution of theme and tone. The first reason is the more obvious, in that perhaps some photographs do not survive. If this is the case, it makes it more difficult for us to make an accurate assessment of Modotti's portfolio throughout the project. However, with the several photographs we do have, the second possibility seems more likely: the subject and style of Modotti's photographs seem to adapt as the attitude and focus of the photographer change (Albers, "Tina Modotti" 36). Modotti begins to concentrate on individuals, their daily tasks and their living conditions.

Anita Brenner, the author who commissioned Weston for the project, was originally born in Mexico, but her family had moved to the United States when the Mexican Revolution began. She returned to Mexico in the twenties with the intent to write a book that was, as Susannah Glusker describes, "a vehicle to deliver the values of the Mexican Revolution" (127). Although it was to discuss themes that were relevant in Mexico at the time, *Idols Behind Altars* was intended to be published for an American audience. Brenner planned to write the text herself, but asked Weston to provide photographs of the art and architecture found throughout some of the Mexican states. Brenner believed, as she states in her book, that "nowhere as in Mexico has art been so organically a part of life, at one with the national ends and the national longings, fully the possession of each human unit, always the prime channel for the nation and for the unit" (32). Brenner hoped to create a visual and written text of the history, culture and religion of Mexico to

distribute among the American people. The book was to be divided into three sections with the first section focusing on the syncretism of pre-Colonial and Catholic beliefs and practices. Brenner wanted to show, as Albers points out, that there was “an Indian idol lurking behind every Catholic altar, [and] a mother goddess inside every Madonna” (*Shadows* 159). The second section would emphasize the arts and religion during the colonial period, and the third section would look at post-Revolutionary works by artists such as Siqueiros, Rivera, Orozco, Jean Charlot and others (Albers, “Tina Modotti” 31).

Although Weston was commissioned with the task of taking at least two hundred pictures for the project, the effort was truly a collaborative one, and even today the debates continue as to who was responsible for taking which photograph (Albers, “Tina Modotti” 32). Brenner does not attribute specific photographs to Modotti or Weston in *Idols Behind Altars*, but she does credit both photographers for their work. In her “Acknowledgement” at the beginning of the book, she states, “The two photographers who shared this commission, Edward Weston and Tina Modotti, are too well known and respected as masters of their craft to expect in *Idols Behind Altars* any acknowledgement less than deeply grateful” (7). Altogether seventy pictures were eventually used, including statues of Madonnas, ex-votos, the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán, Catholic altars, artwork by post-Revolutionary artists and painted calabashes to name a few (Albers, *Shadows* 158; Chilsen 5).

Both Modotti and Weston were recognized for their collaboration on the project, but some photographs from the trip can still be identified as having been taken by one or the other of the artists. Through negatives, signed prints or other methods we can distinguish some of the published pictures as specifically Weston’s. However, in spite of this, even with those works that can be attributed with certainty to Weston, the project was nevertheless a joint effort.

Modotti helped to frame the photographs, choose the angle and arrange the still lifes, even if she wasn't responsible for pushing the button (Lowe 31). Identifying which photographs were taken by Modotti, however, proves to be a bit more challenging. While many of the pictures were taken by both artists together, they still worked independently of one another. We can't identify specifically which images published in *Idols Behind Altars* were exclusively Modotti's, but we do have other photographs that she took during the tour. Although her husband, Roubaix "Robo" de l'Abrie Richey had been deceased for several years at the time of the expedition, Modotti occasionally wrote and sent pictures to his family, particularly his sister, Rose, who she affectionately called Vocio (Stoughton 6-7). Many of Modotti's photographs taken during the *Idols Behind Altars* trip made their way back to Vocio.

One of the scholars that is particularly insightful when it comes to this stage in Modotti's career is Patricia Albers. When Albers was writing her doctoral dissertation on Modotti she contacted the Richey family in hopes that she might get an interview with them and perhaps see some of the photographs, letters and other belongings of Modotti's that were in their care. What she didn't expect to find was a trunk full of about one hundred pictures and other items that belonged to Modotti that had never been seen before except by the family. Albers, along with two Mexican researchers, studied the photographs, Modotti's captions, the clothing of the subjects and other objects in the pictures to determine when and where they were actually taken. While several of these photographs have been successfully dated to the 1926 *Idols Behind Altars* project (about fifteen), the exact time period and location of some of the others are uncertain (Albers, "Tina Modotti" 35). It seems that Albers has been one of the few scholars that has had access to these photographs and other documents and has published her findings. Much of Albers's insight is useful to understanding Modotti's work during the *Idols Behind Altars*

expedition, and I rely heavily on her work in my examination of this phase in Modotti's career. However, Albers's analysis of specific pictures is often brief if she provides any at all

When Modotti, Weston and Brett departed Mexico City, the timing of the trip seemed to be particularly unlucky as it coincided with the Cristero Revolt that was occurring in the western states. The Revolt was initiated after President Elías Calles's administration tried to enforce some anti-clerical clauses that had been written into the Constitution. After the priests refused to comply with Calles's mandate, there was a bloody uprising in addition to a suspension of masses and other church services for almost three years. With tensions high in the area and a general suspicion of foreigners by the natives—especially those foreigners who were visiting religious sites—the moment was not ideal for the group to be traveling alone around the countryside (Albers, *Shadows* 158-59; Argentero 83). Their motives were often questioned and in at least one instance they were accused of being government spies. They found it difficult or impossible to get into religious sites of interest or view sacred artifacts which were often locked up due to the conflict (Argentero 83). With the level of hostilities in the area and natives who questioned the group's intentions, having a woman on the trip became increasingly valuable as she softened their image. Weston recognized Modotti's importance to the group and the project, and in his *Daybooks* he notes the influence of "her tact and sympathy for the Indians." According to Weston her womanly presence made the group seem less threatening (175). Argentero adds that Modotti was "indispensable" during the tour, and she states, "If Weston was the contracted photographer of the trip, Tina once again was his link to reality and to the human world, a sort of cultural filter through which Weston could cope with unrest and tension" (83). The group as a whole was respectful and tactful towards the natives in their interactions, but it was Modotti's ability to engage and sympathize with the indigenous peoples that allowed the photographers to

have access to sites that perhaps would have been impossible to get into considering the political climate. The *Idols Behind Altars* trip seems to be one of the first times that Modotti had sustained interaction with indigenous peoples. Her interest in their lives and cultures undoubtedly grew as she saw them in their own environment rather than depicted on the walls of public buildings.

It seems that the more Modotti interacted with indigenous groups, the more they started to appear in her works. From the photographs in the Richeys' possession that Albers studied, we can see a clear demarcation between Modotti's work from the first half the *Idols Behind Altars* tour and the second. Because of difficult weather conditions—including floods—that occurred during the first month in Puebla and Oaxaca, Modotti only sent a few photographs to the Richey family. However, of the few we do have from those states, we learn that her style mirrored Weston's abstract work as she also emphasized architectural elements. In her package to the Richeys, Modotti included pictures of the altar from the Church of Santa María in Tonantzintla, just outside the city of Puebla and two photographs showed the tile and stone façade of the church of San Francisco Acatepec (Albers, "Tina Modotti 35). In her article Albers doesn't take the time to describe these pictures, which makes it difficult to do an in-depth comparison between the photographs from Modotti's first leg of the journey and the second. Nevertheless, her pictures remained unpeopled until the group's second month in Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato and Querétaro where she began to focus more on individuals and their activities.

Throughout the trip Modotti and Weston interacted with indigenous groups very differently, and their varying observations of those cultures are reflected in their photography from that time. Albers notes that "the photographers' personal work reveals two utterly different mind-sets and two Mexicos. Edward's is exquisitely textured, largely unpeopled, and

aestheticizing, while Tina's shows a place of vibrant active, closely knit Indian communities" (*Shadows* 160). Modotti's interest in the daily lives of the indigenous population began to increase during the tour, and she moved farther away from an emphasis on composition and form. She paid more attention to individuals, their ethnicity and their activities.

Many of the photographs Modotti took during the second half of the *Idols Behind Altars* trip focus on indigenous people completing simple, everyday tasks. While the photographs alone can speak to the humble lifestyle of her subjects, Modotti's captions on her own pictures and at times on Weston's are also very insightful into her definition of *indigenismo* and how she viewed these Mexican citizens. She portrays women in their traditional *rebozos* and homespun, pleated skirts. She depicts indigenous fishermen hanging their nets up to dry after a fishing trip. She was particularly impressed with some of the indigenous musicians that she saw in one city. In the caption included with the photograph of these street musicians, she states, "Young musicians of a village band—mostly all Indians—barefooted but oh how they can play!" (qtd. in Albers, *Shadows* 160). This caption is similar to many of the other captions she included with the photographs that she sent back to Vocio. She refers specifically to "Indians" completing a particular task. Rather than simply focusing on the task being completed or the formalistic qualities of the photograph, these captions show that she was thinking in terms of ethnicity and social differences (Albers, "Tina Modotti" 35). She was intrigued by these individuals and wanted to convey their unique qualities in her work.

In addition to Modotti's captions, it is interesting to note the similarities between what Modotti wrote on the photographs she sent back to Robo's family and Weston's notes in his *Daybooks*. Although we can't identify with certainty that a photograph by Modotti corresponds to a specific entry in Weston's *Daybooks*, Weston's notes do provide us with additional



**Figure 8 Tina Modotti, Untitled [“Market Day - Notice the man at the right carrying his shopping in his hat”], n.d.
gelatin silver print; 2 7/8 in. x 3 5/8 in. (7.3 cm x 9.21 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchase through a gift of the Art Supporting Foundation, John “Launny” Steffens, Sandra Lloyd, Shawn and Brook Byers, Mr. and Mrs. George F. Jewett, Jr., and anonymous donors**

information that describe a particular indigenous custom, a town they visited or an activity that they observed (Albers, “Tina Modotti” 36). His notes also provide further evidence in identifying which of Modotti’s photographs were taken on the tour. One of these pictures by Modotti captures a man and a woman exchanging goods in a town square (Figure 8). Based on the clothing style of the women in the photograph—pleated skirts with uniquely designed *rebozos*—Albers and her team have identified this picture to have been taken somewhere in

Michoacán (Albers, “Tina Modotti” 36). Again Modotti focuses on the simple, mundane tasks of the protagonists as she captions this particular image: “Market day—Notice the man at the right carrying his shopping in his hat” (Albers, “Tina Modotti” 22). In his *Daybooks* Weston writes an entry that could also describe what Modotti is depicting in this scene:

Market day in Pátzcuaro [a town in Michoacán] was next to Oaxaca in beauty and interest. The arranged produce [was] an incentive to buy: neat little pyramids of green chiles, bouquets of lily-white onions, a half block spread of sombreros. The sombreros served not only as head protection, they logically enough became a convenient “catchall,” a receptacle in lieu of bag or pocket. Glancing down at the sombrero of one squatting figure, it held chiles, cigarettes, matches and a handful of tiny silvery fishes. (173)

Although an image of this type would not have been uncommon to find on market day in any city in Michoacán, it is interesting to see that Weston’s entry is almost an identical description of Modotti’s picture on this particular day at the market. It appears that Modotti has taken this picture spontaneously without the knowledge of the subjects. She is unobtrusive as she records this common activity occurring in a Michoacán village, and this allows for her subjects to behave more naturally than they would if they had been posed. By using an angle that looks at the subjects straight on, rather than from a high or low vantage point, Modotti remains more unbiased in her view of these people. She keeps her camera at a respectful distance from the exchange between the buyer and the seller, and rather than trying to construct the photograph in a certain way, she seems to take more of a journalistic approach to this one particular moment. This perspective shows the objectivity and sensitivity with which Modotti begins to photograph indigenous subjects.



Figure 9 Tina Modotti, Untitled (*Fishermen Mending Nets*) ["Indian fishermen drying the nets"], 1926 gelatin silver print; 3 in. x 3 15/16 in. (7.62 cm x 10 cm) San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchase through a gift of the Art Supporting Foundation, John "Launny" Steffens, Sandra Lloyd, Shawn and Brook Byers, Mr. and Mrs. George F. Jewett, Jr., and anonymous donor

Another picture that shows Modotti's same sympathetic but curious eye is the well-known *Fishermen Mending Nets* (Figure 9). According to Albers's research, it seems that this particular photograph was also taken in Pátzcuaro during the *Idols Behind Altars* tour. Like the market day photograph, Modotti's caption and Weston's comments are similar and describe the activity represented in the picture. Modotti's caption describes this photograph as, "Indian fishermen drying the nets" (Albers, "Tina Modotti" 25). In the Pátzcuaro section of Weston's *Daybooks*, he writes of watching a similar event: "Upon a cliff by the church, fishermen mended

nets,—yards of mesh stretched on poles to dry, sunlit and sparkling” (177). In Modotti’s picture we see two indigenous men—reflected by their white clothing and large sombreros—working together on a common task of hanging fishnets to dry. Again, Modotti chooses a camera angle that does not elevate or patronize the indigenous men; rather, it puts them on the same plane as the viewer. From an artistic point of view, they are considered our equals. Just as she tries not to degrade these men through her camera angle, she is not apologetic in her choice of subject, even though the task and the individuals could be considered very ordinary. Albers notes that even this early in her career, Modotti takes another approach in her indigenous photographs than other 1920’s artists do. Of Modotti’s pictures she states:

They distinguish themselves in their directness, individualization of her subjects, and depiction of active, rather than passive, indigenous communities. Although, under many circumstances, Indians showed a profound distrust of whites and *mestizos* (and the feeling was often mutual), Modotti’s work projects warmth and sympathy. Indeed, several individuals appear to respond to her directly. (“Tina Modotti” 39-40)

Here her subjects are indeed unique and individualized rather than a homogenized construction that was often portrayed in Rivera’s murals and other artists’ representations. She reminds the viewer of a people who do seemingly small things for their work, but she does it in a way that is respectful and perhaps engenders admiration. The subjects in her photographs taken during the *Idols Behind Altars* project typically don’t look right at her. However, the close proximity of Modotti to the men in *Fishermen Mending Nets* implies that they—unlike those in the market day picture—were not oblivious to the fact that they were being photographed. This close proximity not only helps us feel more of a kinship with these people, but it also suggests that in order for Modotti to get this close to the natives, she had developed a good rapport with them.

By examining Modotti's photographs throughout the course of the *Idols Behind Altars* expedition we are able to see a mental and artistic shift in the photographer. Albers describes this change:

Tina abandoned themes of flowers and architecture to focus on the soulful and heroic qualities of the Mexican masses. She fixed her lens upon the sun-raked, dust-whipped, harshly beautiful lives of laborers and *campesinos*. Many Modotti photographs reveal a complicity between the photographer and her subjects, viewed not only as individuals of a time and a people. (*Shadows* 173)

Modotti's affection for and sympathy toward indigenous people began to grow during the course of Brenner's project. It was during this time that we can see an evolution in her photography and philosophy as her work began to focus more on the indigenous communities rather than the art and architecture created by those people.

CHAPTER 2

MEXICAN FOLKWAYS: THE POLITICAL SIDE OF TINA MODOTTI

While most of what we know about Tina Modotti's life and the spectrum of her political beliefs come from a close analysis of her photography and comments made by her friends and associates, we do have a rare instance in which Modotti herself expresses in written form her artistic philosophy. Originally published in 1929 in *Mexican Folkways*, "On Photography," in the absence of a more comprehensive document, could be considered Modotti's manifesto for her artistic works. In that article she states:

I consider myself a photographer, nothing more. If my photographs differ from that which is usually done in this field, it is precisely because I try to produce not art but honest photographs, without distortions or manipulations. The majority of photographers still seek "artistic" effects, imitating other mediums of graphic expression. The result is a hybrid product that does not succeed in giving their work the most valuable characteristic it should have—photographic quality. (196)

In an era when paintings were still generally considered the highest form of visual art, Modotti understood that the photographic medium was powerful in its own right. She knew that photographs could be just as influential on her viewers as other mediums could. She believed that by avoiding the usage of "artistic effects" or manipulations in the film development phase that many photographers were experimenting with at the time, she would be able to stay true to her medium while giving a more accurate depiction of the subject.

While Modotti did strive to represent her subjects honestly, we do know that several of her photographs—especially those published in *Mexican Folkways* and *El Machete*—were carefully composed. One in particular, *Worker's Parade*, was even altered artistically in order to

give a specific impression and make a social statement. These alterations were typically the exception rather than the rule with Modotti's photography, but it is interesting to note that they were mostly done for politically charged periodicals where a multitude of opinions and philosophies were shared either through the written word or other artistic mediums. Despite the fact that much could be discussed with regard to her more communist-centric work that was published in *El Machete*, this chapter seeks to explore what she did for *Mexican Folkways*, which primarily focused on a celebration of the indigenous people of Mexico. Additionally, by understanding the political and social implications behind *Mexican Folkways*, we gain a greater understanding of the impact that Modotti's pictures had on her viewers and on readers of the journal. Although Modotti's photographs for the magazine contain some of her most forceful political messages, we can still see that she tries to remain true to her *indigenista* and photographic ideals. As she states in "On Photography," her camera is a "tool," and for her, it is "the most eloquent, the most direct means for fixing, for registering the present epoch" (196). Modotti respectfully and directly portrays indigenous peoples and cultures throughout her *Mexican Folkways* work while simultaneously producing art that is fighting for a social cause and for equal rights for those same individuals.

Frances Toor and Other *Mexican Folkways* Contributors

The main concern following the Revolution of 1910 was how to create a unified nation that was recognized as such in the eyes of Mexican citizens and the world at large. Once the Spaniards conquered Mexico early in the 16th century, they exercised political control and dominion over the country for hundreds of years. The culture, religion, economy, language and even social structure of Mexico began to reflect Spanish values, and this occurred as the imposing government tried to erase any indigenous elements that were in place before their

arrival. The new characteristics and belief systems that were brought by the Spaniards eventually became defining features of the Mexican nation.

After Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, it went through several more decades of political volatility as the country was governed by a minimum of thirty-six presidents. When Porfirio Díaz gained control in 1876, Mexico experienced what Noble describes as a period of “peace and stability” (*Image 13*). While this time may have been one of relative peace compared to the post-independence years, that nation was still ruled by the dictatorial Díaz government and was defined by widespread corruption within his administration. Even with these problems during the *Porfiriato*, Mexico underwent unprecedented economic growth, urbanization and modernization. Regardless of this progress, however, the country was still not unified other than by geographical boundaries; it was composed of many distinctive cultures, races and languages, and it was ruled by a dictator (Noble, *Image 13*). The dissatisfaction with Díaz and his government combined with a lack of unity and equality ultimately led to the Revolution of 1910.

At the conclusion of the Mexican Revolution in 1917, the *Porfiriato* had come to an end and was replaced by a nationalist and capitalist state. However, Mexico still faced many cultural and racial divisions. It became vital for government officials to find a way to unify the country while simultaneously asserting a new identity and direction for the nation (Noble, *Image 14*). One of the biggest obstacles to the formation of a unified state was the fact that Mexico was saturated with a diversity of races, cultures, languages and peoples. All of these became integral factors in the modernization of the country, but race—and by extension *indigenismo*—became a main focus of the various discourses throughout the 1920s as several solutions were forming. While Mexico was trying to extricate its identity and culture from its European-imposed history,

many looked to the indigenous peoples as the new foundation upon which the country's identity could be built. However, by using indigenous people as the main point of unification in the state's new discourse, exaggerated or unrealistic portrayals and definitions of these cultures were often the outcome. In speaking of these results, Francisco Reyes Palma asserts:

De ahí provino la exaltación mítica de la imagen del indio como fuente de originalidad creadora y sustento de lo nacional. Encubierto en ese razonamiento se inició un proceso de colonización interna que buscaba incorporar al indio al idioma y a los patrones culturales del denominador, a la vez que se le expropiaba su particular herencia de raíz prehispánica. (qtd. in Noble, *Image* 111)

As artists, intellectuals and state officials idealized indigenous society, their simultaneous simplification of the racial issue and the debates surrounding the topic had negative consequences. When discussing indigenous people in their country, Mexicans often consolidated all indigenous communities and individuals into one definition and disregarded the diverse cultures and backgrounds of each of these groups. We've seen this in the way that Rivera represented indigenous culture and how Orozco, perhaps, countered Rivera's and other artists' idealized portrayals in his own works. Rivera uniformly showed all indigenous cultures in a positive, proto-Marxist light, ignoring those aspects of their cultures that argued against his view. In *Flower Festival* we saw him create a specific type of people that wore the same clothing and even had similar bone structures and facial features to their Aztec predecessors (Braun 191). The community he depicted was harmonious, but in his mural he failed to recognize that often indigenous communities past and present were defined by a social hierarchy rather than equality (Braun 241). Rivera's works often simplified and gave the wrong impression of indigenous culture to those at home and abroad. And because of the popularity of

his work, this advanced the stereotype that the indigenous individual was attractive, exotic and the prime example of a Marxist community.

Orozco, on the other hand, was more critical of indigenous society than was Rivera. He was aware that indigenous cultures past and present were not free of vices including ignorance, drunkenness and even social discrimination (Charlot 227). While he did not solely look at these groups in a negative light—he even praised them in his murals from time to time—he did not submit to the belief that negative aspects of their cultures and lifestyles should be overlooked. We see this in one of his murals at the Dartmouth College Library, *Ancient Human Sacrifice*, which depicts ancient Mexican natives offering a human in a ritual sacrifice. By incorporating some of these unattractive features of indigenous society into his works, Orozco gave a more realistic perspective than Rivera and other artists. Consequently, he was often seen as the voice that refused to conform to the more popularly idealized views of indigenous communities (Braun 190). Like Rivera's murals, if viewers were not careful when looking at Orozco's artwork they too could get the wrong impression of indigenous groups. Because Orozco was more critical, indigenous people could be seen as immoral and backwards, and any efforts to modernize them might be perceived as a challenge if not impossible.

Both Rivera and Orozco, like other intellectuals and government officials, failed to take into consideration that indigenous Mexicans were not just one group defined either by their virtues or their vices. There were dozens of indigenous communities throughout the country that spoke entirely different languages and had distinct societal traditions. Ultimately, however, the goal of many proponents of *indigenismo* and of many state officials was not just to separate the indigenous from the non-indigenous. Their fundamental purpose was to create a new *mestizo*

race by way of state-sponsored programs that fostered education and the arts through a process that Lowe calls “aestheticizing indigenous art” (37; Noble, *Image* 109-10).

A publication that helped to cultivate an understanding of indigenous cultures in order to facilitate the state’s move toward *mestizaje* was the bilingual journal *Mexican Folkways*, created by the American, Frances Toor. Toor, an anthropology graduate, writer and folklorist from the University of California, was attracted to the 1920’s Mexican atmosphere and came to the country captivated by its indigenous culture and folklore (Noble, *Image* 111; Figarella 48).

Reflecting several years later on her arrival in Mexico, Toor stated:

As I knew enough Spanish to carry on a conversation, I made friends easily with the Indians, and became fascinated by their courtesy and customs as well as by their modes of artistic expression. Because of my own joy in the discovery of an art and civilization different from any that I had previously known, I thought it would interest others as well. Thus I conceived the idea of the magazine. (“Mexican Folkways” 208)

Mexican Folkways was created with the intent to take a closer look at the art and culture of these indigenous communities. Toor’s definition of culture, however, was more expansive in that it not only included the architecture and the artwork—perhaps considered the high art by elite Mexicans at the time—it included a folklorist element as well. Anything where the indigenous individual was artistically representing himself or his customs—whether it be through visual art, music or archaeology—was something that interested Toor for the journal. *Mexican Folkways* was formatted to include photographs, drawings, essays, poems and other mediums that could re-create indigenous cultural and folkloric traditions. The magazine was designed to help foreigners and Mexicans alike to really understand what it meant to be “Mexican”—a Mexicanness that was believed to be found through a closer identification with

the indigenous cultures and artwork (Albers, *Shadows* 157). Discussing her purpose for the formation of *Mexican Folkways*, Toor wrote in her editorial in the first edition:

It is my hope that Mexican Folkways may be of use to the many high school and University students of Spanish as material for the study of social background, which gives insight into literature and language, as well as to those who are interested in folklore and the Indian for their own sakes. For this reason it seemed advisable to publish in both languages. (“Editor’s Foreword” 4)

Toor was not just interested in indigenous arts and culture, however, nor did she publish the journal solely with the purpose of educating her fellow Americans about the folklore from this demographic. She was also concerned with how the Mexican government was integrating, treating and viewing indigenous groups that had been previously overlooked and even despised for centuries. In *Mexican Folkways*’s first edition she states:

In Mexico there are about ten million [Indians], at least two-thirds of the population, living in the remnants of their ancient civilizations. It is these ten million that President Calles has promised to incorporate into modern life. The task will be a tremendously slow and difficult one, but it would be even slower and more difficult if it were not that through his folkloric expression the Indian has kept alive that something which has prevented him from degenerating into a mere beast of burden, compatible with his mode of living. (“Editor’s Foreword” 3)

Economically, educationally and socially, indigenous people had not been recognized or treated equally by the government or their neighbors to this point. It was Toor’s hope that *Mexican Folkways* would be a catalyst for significant changes in the indigenous people’s living conditions and their recognition by the state. She knew that governmental reform had been and would

continue to be slow in this area, but through a valuation of the arts, she believed that progress could be made more quickly. However, seven years after the publication of the first edition in 1932, Toor recognized that perhaps not as much progress had been made as she had hoped:

Everyone knows by this time that the Mexican Revolution of 1910 has brought about a social change. . . . The change thus far consists chiefly in an attitude. By this I mean that 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. (“Mexican Folkways” 205-06)

Although she never states exactly how the journal had a hand in this change, Toor does say that “*Mexican Folkways* has played an important role in the formation of the new Mexican attitude toward the Indian by making known his customs and art” (“Mexican Folkways” 205).

Toor believed that recognition of the indigenous communities was important and that an improvement in their living conditions was vital, but she also understood that from the government’s perspective, indigenous communities needed to become more modernized in order to be fully integrated into the state. As Noble puts it, “The disparate Indian communities had to be drawn out of the ‘past’ and into the capitalist present” and “‘educated’ into the ways of the modern nation” (*Image* 111, 114). The development of this “modern nation,” however, did not just require an adaption on the part of the indigenous people. The elite and educated individuals of society needed to be exposed to their indigenous heritage in order to learn an appreciation for

it. The hope was that this newfound appreciation would result in a more positive dialogue between the “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” sectors of Mexican society. *Mexican Folkways* was seen by many, including government officials, to be one of, if not the main authority on Mexican folk art and culture. It was also considered to be the best method for educating the elite, the intellectuals and state officials about those groups (Noble, *Image* 111). Even President Plutarco Elías Calles, president of Mexico from 1924-1928, argued that “[*Mexican Folkways*] is making known to our own people and to foreigners the real spirit of our aboriginal races and the expressive feeling of our people in general, rich in beautiful traditions” (qtd. in Toor, “Our Anniversary” 4). As the government sought to create a Mexican nation with one *mestizo* race, they knew that they had to define what it meant to be “Mexican” while at the same time, as Noble states, “control and contain” the many indigenous groups within its borders (*Image* 118). *Mexican Folkways* was a way for them to convey a definition of the “new Mexican” to the upper societal classes.

In addition to helping the elite gain exposure to and appreciation for indigenous cultures, *Mexican Folkways* became a location where people could join in the conversation about the direction of the nation artistically, racially and culturally (Noble, *Image* 113; Cuevas-Wolf 126-27). It appealed to many artists, writers and intellectuals at the time, and contributors included Jean Charlot, Carleton Beals, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and Manuel Gamio (Albers, *Shadows* 157). The journal was not just a means to celebrate indigenous cultures and lifestyles. It was a forum in which these elite individuals, particularly Gamio and Rivera, could not only share but also “popularize” their philosophies and opinions regarding *indigenismo* (Braun 190). In the first publication of the magazine, Gamio shared his beliefs about the native population and also his views on the direction of the periodical at large. He believed that the indigenous

individual “se encuentra en etapas culturales más o menos primitivas” or “backwards” (“*El aspecto utilitario*” 7). Gamio understood that in order for Mexico to progress as a nation there needed to be a standardization of cultures, languages and races, and his *indigenismo* was a proponent of those changes. Many scholars and politicians at the time, including Gamio, believed that Mexicans were divided into two groups that needed to be united. Noble argues that Gamio believed these two groups to be “the elite and educated minority and the uneducated backward mass” (*Image* 115). Gamio recognized, however, that immediate conversion from a dual culture system to a single *mestizo* culture would be nearly impossible for the general population. It would not be able to take place until the government analyzed, what he called, the indigenous people’s “*diversos y peculiares modos de pensar*” and made provisions to educate the indigenous about the modern world and the elite about the significance of indigenous society (Gamio, “*El aspecto utilitario*” 8). Gamio believed that understanding and studying indigenous folk art and cultures would provide a smoother transition to a true *mestizo* nation, and *Mexican Folkways* would provide that educational function for the Mexican elite (Braun 190).

Mexican Folkways was, in many respects, a good location and resource for educating the general population on indigenous culture. However, the journal, as Braun asserts, “ignored the complexity of the issues it raised and disdained dissenting views” (190). Orozco was perhaps the contributor most well-known for his dissenting position. In Orozco’s opinion, the Mexican government and intellectual elite were incorrectly idealizing ancient indigenous societies. He believed that their interpretations of ancient cultures were most likely inaccurate due to the inconsistent and sparse amount of information that they had about those groups at the time. Orozco also understood that indigenous peoples in 1920’s Mexico weren’t necessarily

continuous with their ancient predecessors and that there was, perhaps, a cultural disjunction between the more ancient and modern indigenous groups (Braun 190).

Although Toor, Gamio and other government officials professed *Mexican Folkways* to be the authentic authority on indigenous peoples and cultures, it seemed, rather, to exploit and idealize the identity of those societies. Figarella suggests that the journal, along with Anita Brenner's *Idols Behind Altars*, served to perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes of indigenous groups that included viewing them as beautiful and sensuous individuals that led an exotic life in an idyllic setting. Figarella contends that in order for the nation to become a legitimate state in the eyes of its people and other countries, it, indeed, needed to create “*un imaginario mitológico*” (49). She continues:

Por una parte, [un imaginario de ‘lo nacional’] consolidó ante ojos extranjeros su imagen de nación con cultura propia y tradiciones milenarias—lo que operó como una especie de barrera simbólica ante un país amenazado por las continuas injerencias de los Estados Unidos—, pero, por otra, instauró una imagen estereotipada de México como país pintoresco y folklórico, suspendido en una mítica Edad de Oro donde el progreso y la modernización no tenían cabida. (49)

Many individuals, like Orozco, believed that *Idols Behind Altars*—Brenner's handbook of Mexican art and architecture written for an American audience—and *Mexican Folkways* were two publications that perpetuated this mythology and contributed to some of the falsified views of indigenous people and cultures.

In spite of the fact that *Mexican Folkways* encouraged and even provided space for an open dialogue on *indigenismo*, it was Diego Rivera's definition that really directed the publication and its philosophies of *indigenismo* (Cuevas-Wolf 132). As the journal's art director

and a regular contributor, Rivera frequently displayed his own idealized version of indigenous culture, pageantry, art and history similar to what we have explored in previous chapters. Braun identifies the direction of *Mexican Folkways* and its connection to Rivera's *indigenismo*:

[*Mexican Folkways*] characterized the Indian peasant as a natural artist though backward, superstitious, and downtrodden. In an appreciation of *retablos* and *ex votos*, for example, Rivera asserted that the modern Mexican Indian was 'an incorrigible creator of beauty,' who by sheer native intuition converted foreign models (Hispanic paintings of saints and martyrs) into something genuinely Mexican. At other times he spoke about the inherent artistry of ancient Indians, indicating that he conflated the two. The decadent yet vibrant indigenous majority—an idealized collective entity, lacking specific identity—was incapable of fending for itself and must be taken in hand by sympathetic new authorities. (190)

For Rivera the indigenous people of the present were just like the indigenous people of the past and should be looked to by the nation as a way to progress. He believed that they should be celebrated and not overlooked; however, he also recognized that “new authorities” would be needed to help usher in this new age. *Mexican Folkways* was to provide commentary by these “new authorities,” and ultimately, it was Rivera's version of *indigenismo* that came to classify the journal.

Modotti's Involvement with *Mexican Folkways*

The more Tina Modotti interacted with Diego Rivera, the more she participated in the same organizations that he was involved with, including *Mexican Folkways*. Shortly after Modotti returned from the *Idols Behind Altars* project, Toor asked Modotti to be a contributing editor to the journal, and over the next few years the photographer contributed forty-five pictures

to the publication (Figarella 139; Lowe 30; Noble, *Image* 108). Many of these photographs were of indigenous folk art and included masks, piñatas and carved sculptures of Christ (Lowe 30). Others included her reproductions of the 1920s murals by *Los Tres Grandes* David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera. As the muralists considered themselves to be the cultural fountains of native Mexican art, Modotti used her photography to help popularize their works and indigenous art generally. Her photographs of the murals were published in art magazines throughout the world and gave a wider visibility to the cultural renaissance that was happening in Mexico. The pictures had a significant influence on how the Mexican was viewed, and they even impacted the international art world to a degree during that time as the murals gave new insight into the relationship between visual art and architecture (Lowe 37; Figarella 172).

Many of Modotti's most well-known *Mexican Folkways* photographs, however, were her portraits and emblematic, revolutionary still lifes. These were also her most politically charged works and were taken in order to evoke a social and political change. During the 1920s photography was becoming a more popular form of expression, and it was beginning to be recognized as a legitimate artistic medium. Even Weston considered it to be the method that could most accurately represent life (Weston 55). Modotti also recognized its potential and tried to utilize it in her *Mexican Folkways* works with the idea of giving a more genuine perspective of the indigenous Mexican (Lowe 34). Through these photographs she promoted revolutionary ideals to make people aware of the poverty that she saw and condemned on the streets of Mexico (Argentero 130). Argentero describes Modotti's photographs:

Through the camera lens, Modotti communicates a character's entire history in an evanescent moment, and through her images, we are able to see and 'read' the poverty of

a country. Her photographs contain an obsession with humanity, her subjects become concepts, and the images she was able to obtain were not neutral on social reality. Thus, the photographer became an artisan who denounced the ills of society, because she carefully chose her subjects from the bottom of society, not the top, and her photography became a ‘medium for didacticism, to teach, exhort, and proselytize ideals. (130)

Modotti was sensitive to the poor, particularly the indigenous poor, that she photographed, and she fought for their equal rights and societal recognition of them. She knew that depicting these people and the symbols of their culture with a certain degree of sympathy would have a stronger social impact and could help create a more egalitarian country. As Albers points out Modotti didn’t just want to record indigenous Mexicans and their culture as “specimens to be catalogued or as accessories to a bucolic landscape;” she wanted to create a dignified vision of them so as to affect Mexican society (*Shadows* 160).

Worker’s Parade

Even though Modotti tried to be straightforward and genuine in her work, some of her photographs were composed during a shoot or manipulated afterward in the darkroom. She was known for making decisions throughout the photographic process so as to maximize the effect that her message would have on the viewer. *Worker’s Parade* (Figure 10), published initially in *Mexican Folkways* in 1926, is perhaps Modotti’s most iconic photograph and is one that best represents her tendency towards photographic manipulation. Many scholars consider the publication of *Worker’s Parade* as the turning point in her career (*Shadows* 157; Figarella 137; Lowe 32). With this photograph she further distances herself from Weston’s style and customary subject matter, and she uses indigenous people to make a political point about, as Albers puts it, “a powerful solidarity of class” (*Shadows* 157). *Worker’s Parade* becomes



Figure 10 Tina Modotti, *Worker's Parade*, 1926
gelatin silver photograph; 8 7/16 x 7 5/16" (21.5 x 18.6 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A., Anonymous Gift
Digital Image ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

particularly representative of Modotti's more revolutionary style as it shows a collective mass of indigenous workers fighting for the same social cause. It embodies her ideals of an egalitarian society while simultaneously showing the power that an underprivileged, but unified, group of indigenous people can have. The photograph seemed to be Modotti's initiation into the artistic, political arena, and after its first appearance she began to create her most politically charged

works (*Shadows* 157; Figarella 137; Lowe 32). *Worker's Parade* left such a powerful impression on the viewers that it was actually printed four more times with four different titles in various magazines in succeeding years¹⁰ (Argentero 130).

Throughout her works of indigenous people and culture, Modotti tried to remain true to her subject matter and to present realistic and honest depictions. Although one of Modotti's intentions for *Worker's Parade* was most likely to create a convincing portrayal of the event, its placement by Toor in *Mexican Folkways* connects it to the mythological Mexico that Figarella accuses the journal of perpetuating (48-49). *Worker's Parade* was published alongside an article by Pablo Gonzalez Casanova called "Origins of Stories of Indian Mexico" that described the folkloric tradition of indigenous Mexico, and in many ways it seemed that Modotti's photograph was included almost as an illustration of Gonzalez Casanova's article. In his article Gonzalez Casanova analyzes several indigenous fables in which the characters are primarily animals, and from his research, he concludes that these stories are some of the "most primitive" found in Mexico (12). It is interesting to note that the fables he chooses to elaborate on are stories that include a weaker animal coming into conflict with a stronger one. Sometimes the stronger animal prevails, but at other times, it is the weaker animal, which through his cleverness, is able to outsmart the larger, more skilled one. Gonzalez Casanova tells the story of an owl who met a cat one night and wanted to pull out his eyes. The cat, being clever, saved himself and tricked the owl into only pulling out one eye. It seems that in some ways this story could be equated with Modotti's picture of the workers marching for better conditions. As the indigenous men photographed have been oppressed for centuries and categorized as the smaller, weaker Mexican breed, their marching for their rights shows that, like the cat, they too can outsmart their

¹⁰ Argentero and Lowe list these four journals and photograph titles as: *New Masses* (1928): *May Day in Mexico*; *Creative Art* (1929): *A Peasants' Manifestation*; *transition* (1929): *Strike Scene*; and *BIFUR* (1930): *Mexique* (Argentero 267, n. 18; Lowe 149, n. 189).

oppressors. Cristina Cuevas-Wolf characterizes the location of *Worker's Parade* in *Mexican Folkways* as “one of the present-day representations of the mythology of the proletarian peasant,” and she goes on to argue that “such an image in the context of González Casnova’s article suggests Toor’s willingness to juxtapose past and present incidents of Indian life: mythology and political activism” (151-52). While it is true that Toor—and even Modotti—had her own agenda for *Mexican Folkways*, it is critical to understand *Worker's Parade* on its own terms as Modotti originally developed it rather than focusing on the context in which the picture was published. Modotti did want to show through *Worker's Parade* a united, egalitarian indigenous Mexico as she understood it; however, it was not her purpose to perpetuate an idyllic myth that Rivera and other contributors to *Mexican Folkways* were often accused of promoting.

Although Modotti prided herself on the authenticity of her work, she does take several liberties with *Worker's Parade* as she tries to convey her political message through a manipulated image. While big changes were not made to the photograph, Modotti included a few small alterations in the development of the picture that affect the way the work is viewed. When processing the film she selected a method that causes the picture to appear blurry and even grainy. This effect not only gives the illusion that each person and object in the image is in motion, but it is as if they are flowing into one another. The group’s dynamic is emphasized as the individual’s identity is more difficult to distinguish (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 37, 39). Modotti also made very deliberate and conscious choices when she was selecting what should be included in the photograph. After the image was developed she cropped the picture in an effort to more tightly frame the group of indigenous men that are the main subjects of the work (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 61). Much of Modotti’s *oeuvre* tended to focus on the identity of a single individual or a small group of people. While Rivera’s works often portray indigenous

peoples as looking nearly identical, Modotti tried to make each of her subjects appear distinct, and she tried to give them an identity that was unique to each person being photographed. Rather than choosing to emphasize one or two specific people in *Worker's Parade*, however, Modotti elects to homogenize the workers and show the power and solidarity of the group. Individuals stay anonymous in this picture (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 37, 39). Taken at the May Day parade in 1926 the photograph not only shows the group dynamics through the composition of the picture, but it shows that these workers are alike in their dress, behavior and purpose. The visual coherency that unites the group tries to express the power that Modotti saw in this band of indigenous men engaged in an event that demanded social change (Lowe 32). Modotti uses this unity to mark them as a truly Marxist-egalitarian type of community, and, thus, *Worker's Parade* becomes her quintessential work when it comes to defining her political and social agendas.

Modotti also makes a few compositional choices with this image and even abstracts her subjects slightly to illustrate the equality and unity that she perceived among the workers. Instead of photographing them from the front and highlighting their individuality, she chooses to show the men from behind so that to the viewer they all look alike. As the viewer we are additionally removed from the situation by a high angle shot that causes us to observe the workings and movement of the group as a whole rather than individually (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 39). There is only one identity in the picture: that which belongs to the *group* of indigenous men. All of them are dressed in the white, cotton clothing and sombreros traditionally worn by the *campesinos*, *rancheros* and *vaqueros*—all participants in the Revolution. Modotti uses the repeated motif of the sombrero as the most dominant feature of the image, and by doing so she reminds us of the indigenous cause and Revolutionary ideals (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 49).

As the Revolution of 1910 continued throughout the early part of the twentieth century and as photographers documented the events, the style of sombrero used by a particular individual came to signify which side that person was affiliated with. The sombreros were the predominant aspect of those pictures and indicated the different factions, ideals and revolutionary leaders, but following the Revolution the large *charro* sombrero became the one that was most represented in the photography and visual arts. For foreigners, the sombrero represented all of Mexico and Latin America as a whole, but for Mexicans, it had a very specific racial connotation (Noble, *Image* 99). This is significant in that the *charro*-style sombrero was primarily used by Emiliano Zapata and his followers, and it was the “personal trademark” of the revolutionary leader himself (Noble, *Image* 101). Zapata’s faction was comprised primarily—though not entirely—of indigenous peasants, and as Zapata came to be recognized by the *charro*-style sombrero, by extension the entire indigenous population did as well (Noble, *Image* 101). Knight notes that the Revolution was fought “on the basis of considerable Indian participation.” He continues, “Zapatismo, it is important to note, was linked to the ‘Indian’ cause first by outraged planters, who similarly shrilled the dangers of caste war, and later by *indigenista* reformers like Gamio (and even Vasconcelos), who chose to see Zapatismo, in retrospect, as the awakening of the Indian people of Morelos” (76-77). Because of the associations that were made between the indigenous and Zapata, indigenous people were predominantly depicted in conjunction with the *charro*-style sombrero in much of the art following the Revolution. The sombrero then became a racial marker in these visual representations and pointed out differences between the elite, Anglo Mexicans and poor indigenous Mexicans. Through these depictions an artist’s views on indigenous peoples and cultures was also conveyed (Noble, *Image* 101). Diego Rivera was especially notorious for his use of the sombrero as a racially distinguishing

characteristic in his works. He could be considered the one that popularized it as an indigenous symbol as we have already seen in *Distribution of Arms* and *Flower Festival* (Figarella 169). With this in mind, the dynamics of Modotti's *Worker's Parade* become much more acute. A picture of men in sombreros would not have the same impact on a foreigner that they would have on a Mexican since a foreigner would likely just see a group of Mexicans or Latin Americans. Because of the racial connotations that are inherently inscribed in this picture, Mexicans would have had a much more forceful reaction to this work (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 55).

The Revolution was not fought initially over race, but race did become, as Noble states, "a key and controversial issue" following the conflict. She continues, "The state attempted to forge a new notion of *mexicanidad*," and to do this they asserted retroactively that the Revolution was fought primarily with racial tensions in mind (*Image* 102). As the government sought to construct a *mestizo* nation that was neither indigenous nor European, anything that was considered one or the other was seen to threaten the foundation of the new state. Thus, politicians tried to eliminate what was seen as the "backwardness" of indigenous cultures while simultaneously including the positive aspects of those groups embodied in their folk arts (Noble, *Image* 120-21). However, anything that was seen as not conforming to this process of assimilation was seen as challenging the new direction of Mexico. *Mexican Folkways* was actively part of the government's effort that, in Noble's words, "sought to define, control and contain the diverse indigenous communities that existed within the nation-space" (*Image* 118). Even Toor recognized in her first editorial that the process of assimilation would be even slower and more challenging than it already was if not for the folkloric expression of the indigenous cultures published in the journal ("Editors Foreword" 3). Their folk art and folklore seemed to make indigenous people useful to the country, and as *Mexican Folkways* was a site where this

type of work could be published, the journal became even more essential to how indigenous communities and cultures were viewed, treated and integrated into Mexican society (Noble, *Image 120*).

It is in this atmosphere that Modotti's *Worker's Parade* was published. An understanding of the political and social implications behind *Mexican Folkways* and how the indigenous were viewed at the time, helps us analyze Modotti's photograph. In *Worker's Parade* Modotti uses the sombrero to her advantage to inform the viewer that we are looking at a group of indigenous men, but to her, this isn't just any indigenous community. This is a community of workers that are protesting their rights, and by using the sombrero the group has distinguished itself from a *mestizo* Mexico. Its very existence, therefore, challenges and does not conform to the idea of a homogenous society (Noble, *Image 118*). Rather than a community of *mestizo* Mexicans, Modotti celebrates the unified *indigenous* body. She does not degrade her subjects in this photograph. Instead, she uses this piece, as Verdicchio explains, as "a way to mark the historical presence of subjects to whom it had been denied or made inaccessible" (i). Modotti depicts the indigenous body to remind the viewer that they exist and should not be overlooked as they had been for centuries (Argentero 130). She also demonstrates through her photograph that within these groups we can find positive values and a sense of unity and community that should be integrated into our own lives and cultures.

Alegorías de la Revolución

Many of Modotti's photographs that were published in *Mexican Folkways* do not overtly state the political ideology that she was trying to emphasize. Rather, in several of her works she chose to group together common objects that had symbolic meaning for Mexicans and that related to her philosophy of *indigenismo*. In the series that Figarella calls "*Alegorías de la*

Revolución,” Modotti highlights items such as a guitar, a sombrero and a hammer, to name a few (Figarella 138). Just as she uses the symbol of the sombrero in *Worker’s Parade* to convey a specific message, she does the same thing with the objects in these works to make them among the most politically and ideologically stimulating pictures that she created. The *Alegorías de la Revolución* series was initially published in *Mexican Folkways* in 1927 and was reprinted later in *El Machete* and a few other magazines. Many of these photographs went on to be some of her

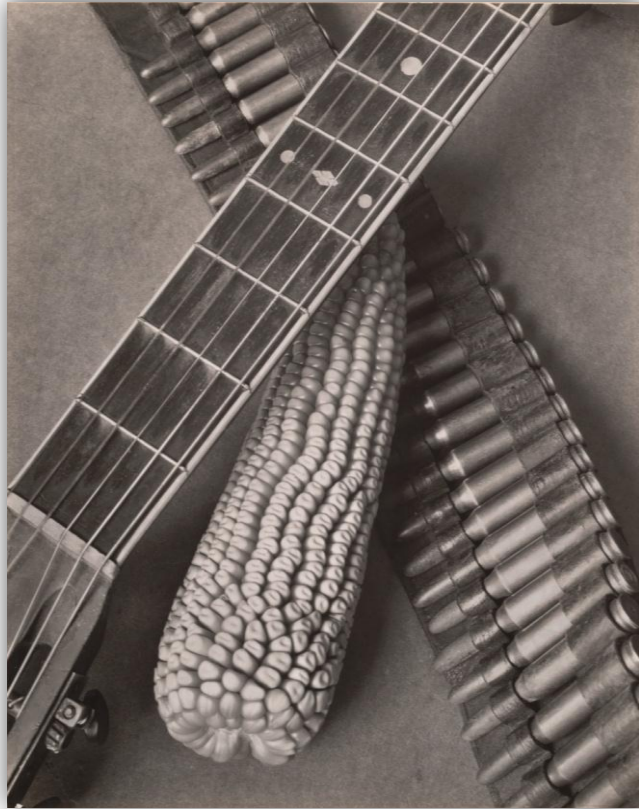


Figure 11 Tina Modotti, Illustration for Mexican Song (*Guitarra, mazorca de maíz y canana*), 1927 gelatin silver photograph; 9 3/16 x 7 5/16” (23.4 x 18.6 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A., Anonymous Gift
Digital Image ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

most iconic and include: *Guitarra, machete y hoz*; *Guitarra, mazorca de maíz y canana* (Figure 11); *Mazorca, canana y hoz*; *Sombrero, martillo y hoz* (Figure 12) (Figarella 138, 174, 176). While these images could be discussed individually for their own merits, I will focus mostly on the group as a whole, but will give particular emphasis to *Sombrero, martillo y hoz*, as it best relates to Mexican indigenous cultures.

Modotti carefully composed and even manipulated all of the *Alegorías de la Revolución* pictures, but she still kept them relatively simple in their content. It is interesting to note that this series touches on significant social and political themes, but Modotti never titled them herself to

reflect her political views. In fact, any titles that have been attributed to them were provided by other individuals that either published or marketed the photographs after they were developed (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 175). Although it would have been easy for Modotti to title these works with something more specific that represented the ideological theme she was going for, she chose, rather, to allow the viewers to make their own connections. Many of these common tools and objects represented the poor, the forgotten, the Mexican *campesino* and indigenous individual and would have reminded Mexicans of revolutionary ideals.

At the time these photographs were taken, Modotti was becoming more involved with the Mexican Communist Party, and many works in this series are reflective of her communist ideals. Her use of the hammer and sickle reminds the viewer of the Bolshevik Revolution and the efforts other communists were making throughout the world. However, these themes overlap significantly with her philosophy of *indigenismo*. In both communist societies and the indigenous cultures that she observed, Modotti admired the sense of community and equality that she perceived in both (Figarella 174-75; Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 77). By using the symbols of the indigenous community together with those representing the Bolsheviks and their supporters, she emphasizes the significance of an egalitarian community. In an abstract way Modotti represents and encourages the unification of the masses in order to create a new social climate (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 78). Folgarait describes what he sees as the guiding principle behind these photographs of Modotti: “All individuals of society must first be made to feel comradeship within their class in order to strive toward the greater whole of a classless society. All sense of individualism must be transformed into a sense of the collective. One person is many people, and therein lies the power to transform society” (*Seeing Mexico* 80). This is the crux of Modotti’s philosophies of *indigenismo* and communism. Modotti admired in the indigenous



Figure 12 Tina Modotti, *Sombbrero, martillo y hoz* (Mexican Sombrero with Hammer and Sickle), 1927 gelatin silver photograph; 19.4 x 21.6 cm National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

communities what she perceived as classless societies, and through *Alegorías de la Revolución* she uses common elements to connect the viewer to indigenous people and their lifestyles. It is her hope that images like these will help the Mexican masses to unite in order to create a more cohesive population. Folgarait contends that *Alegorías de la Revolución* is even propagandistic in that through the reproduction of these objects Modotti “is representing a mass movement”—a revolution by a collective body fighting for a social cause (*Seeing Mexico* 63, 79).

Of the photographs in this series, *Sombrero, martillo y hoz* (Figure 12) perhaps best illustrates the relationship between Modotti's communist and *indigenista* philosophies. By the inclusion of the sombrero in this photograph, Modotti immediately causes the viewer to relate the image to the indigenous community, similarly to what she did with the repetition of the *charro*-style sombrero in *Worker's Parade*. This simple object gives the viewer a protagonist in Modotti's story and makes the indigenous individual central. The *martillo* and *hoz*, however, have, at minimum, a dual meaning in this picture. While these were common tools that the *campesinos* used, they were also objects that were simultaneously associated with communist groups. Modotti's use of these items infers a connection between the Russian Revolution and the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Modotti gives us a protagonist, and through the tools she tells us, or rather, reminds us of a significant action. The Revolution of 1910 marked a change in Mexican history and how the indigenous and other impoverished Mexicans were viewed. Prior to 1910 the indigenous groups were largely an overlooked and ignored people, and although the Revolution was not fought over race, that did become a central issue after 1917. As the country began to redefine itself in light of its indigenous past and present, many Mexicans believed that the conflict was fought over race. Through these symbols Modotti reminds the viewer that those Revolutionary ideals—equal rights for the entire population—should not be obsolete; rather, they should be remembered through a collective mass striving to live those principles. Folgarait makes an observation about Modotti's *Alegorías de la Revolución* photographs:

Therefore, she is representing a mass movement through a collection of implements.

Mass, also, because one cannot imagine that two or three individuals alone can effect radical social change. These arrangements, by implying successful action, suggest it, by

definition, as action by many. The hands of many will have placed these objects down and just as many will retrieve them. (*Seeing Mexico* 78)

Modotti uses common, everyday objects to invite the Mexican masses to embrace the values that were embodied in what she observed to be classless indigenous societies.

As an *indigenista* Modotti tried to remain true and faithful to the indigenous subjects that she portrayed. While her photographic technique and her philosophy of *indigenismo* remained the same throughout her years working on *Mexican Folkways*, her intent with those photographs was not just to “represent life” as Weston was known to do (Weston 55). Rather, she caused her viewers to question their own positions regarding race and the government’s treatment of indigenous groups. Her works for the journal were clear and demanded changes in how indigenous cultures and individuals were portrayed at all levels of society. Modotti used *Mexican Folkways* to publish photographs such as *Workers Parade* and *Alegorías de la Revolución* that metaphorically promoted her ideas of an egalitarian community that she observed in indigenous Mexicans.

CHAPTER 3

THE WOMEN OF TEHUANTEPEC

The night of January 10, 1929 proved to be a pivotal moment in the life of Tina Modotti. While she was walking home with her lover, Julio Antonio Mella, two gunshots were fired that struck Mella who would die later that night from the wounds. At the time Mella was famous throughout Latin America as the communist revolutionary who had been exiled from his home country of Cuba due to his subversive political activity there. After his expulsion from Cuba he came to Mexico where he met Modotti at the office of *El Machete* during the summer of 1928 (Constantine 104). There seemed to be an instant connection between the pair, and the relationship that began as two individuals committed to the communist cause later evolved to one of intimacy.

Within a few days following the death of Mella, Modotti was accused of the murder, arrested and put on trial. She was eventually acquitted, and it was discovered that the murder most likely came under the orders of Gerardo Machado's Cuban administration. Despite the innocent verdict, however, Modotti was already suspected by the Mexican government of other seditious activities, and they considered her a potential threat to national security. As an active member of the Mexican Communist Party that was known for "pressuring" the government at times, Modotti and other members of the party were under regular surveillance by state authorities. The murder case made Modotti an easy target for the Mexican government that was looking for an excuse to have her deported (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 135). Additionally, due to the national and international recognition that Modotti had begun to receive for her photography, this was a high-profile case, and the events of the trial were all over the Mexican newspapers.

Not only was Modotti's standing with the state under suspicion, but the accusation and subsequent trial hurt her reputation and caused her a lot of inner turmoil as well (Lowe 34, 42).

Once Modotti was acquitted of the murder she knew that she wouldn't be able to stay in Mexico much longer, and in the midst of this particularly difficult year, she needed some time to recover and heal before her eventual deportation. The death of her lover, the murder accusation, her arrest and the looming prospect of being expelled from the country had all taken a toll on the photographer (Lowe 42). She decided to travel to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to take some time away from the challenges that haunted her in the city. Modotti had always admired what she had learned about the Tehuana culture, but in her six years in Mexico she had never had the opportunity to visit the area. It is uncertain the exact reasons why Modotti traveled to Tehuantepec specifically and not to another location, but it is likely that what she had heard about the region from Diego Rivera and the other intellectuals in her social circle influenced her decision to go. Modotti's travels seemed to be a cathartic experience for her as she was able to escape, albeit briefly, the many political dangers that seemed to face her. And we know that following the trip she returned to Mexico City as Argenteri explains "at peace with herself and ready to continue pursuing Mella's and her [political] struggle" (134). The simple lifestyle of the strong Tehuana women that she encountered seemed to bring a sense of tranquility to the artist and alleviate some of her suffering, at least temporarily (Argenteri 134). It proved to be a time that allowed Modotti to re-examine her life while simultaneously preparing for the changes that were on the horizon (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 130; Argenteri 134).

The photographs that Modotti took during her time in Tehuantepec are in some ways very different from her other photographic periods that have been discussed up to this point. It seems that her depictions of indigenous people and culture earlier in her career were most often created

for a specific political or social purpose; they were made with the intent to affect some kind of change or to provoke an action by the government or the Mexican people as a whole. With her work among the women of Tehuantepec, this was not her intention. Her photographs weren't used in *Mexican Folkways* or the politically charged *El Machete*, and in fact, many of them were sent as unpolished "snapshots" to friends (Modotti, *Letters* 67). For various reasons the majority of the subjects in these photographs were un-posed, and the photographs themselves were hastily taken. At the outset, Modotti seems to have taken these shots largely for the sake of pleasure, but by the type of women she depicts and the activities they are doing, her work there also proves to be a cathartic mechanism that helped her to heal from Mella's death and recover some of her strength that had waned during that year. Although the audience is different in these photographs from that in other phases of her career, we see through three photographs—*Mujer de Tehuantepec*, *Mujeres de Tehuantepec* and *Autorretrato*—how Modotti's concept of *indigenismo* remains consistent. She respectfully celebrates this perceived matriarchal society, and by doing so she counters the mythologized and often exaggerated representations of these women that had been done for many decades prior to her visit. Modotti honors the Tehuanas in a way that is not only respectful, but her depictions of strong, established women seem to help fortify and strengthen her.

Artistic Representations of Tehuantepec

When Modotti left for Tehuantepec she was familiar with the stories of its fabled and idealized women who dominated the society. She had seen Diego Rivera's mythologized representations of them on the walls of the Ministry of Education and the National Palace, and she had heard stories from Rivera and his wife about the exotic world of Tehuantepec. In his *Daybooks*, Weston mentions a party he and Modotti attended at the Rivera home where the topic

had been discussed. Referring to the event that occurred in November 1923, shortly after they had arrived in Mexico, he writes:

There was much talk of Tehuantepec, the most southerly state on the Isthmus, of the beautiful women and their costumes. The women handle the commerce of the state; the men do the physical labor. Free love is common practice in spite of Catholicism, which is taken seriously only as a festival. The natives speak a language of their own which is supposed by some scholars to be the tongue of the ancient Atlantians. (34)

The mood in Mexico in 1923 had captivated Modotti and Weston and was what compelled them to travel to the country. The tales of Tehuantepec seemed to be just what they were expecting from their Mexican experience. The mood was one of rebirth, of experimentation and one that was preoccupied with the indigenous. The accounts of the fantastical Tehuantepec intrigued Weston, but the stories and images that Rivera created particularly impressed Modotti.

Throughout the western world in the 1920s, there was still an interest in anything of the exotic and the sublime, a holdover from nineteenth-century romantic sentiments. This fascination with the “Other” culture seemed to be more popular in the 1800s in Europe, but it had gained momentum in the Americas as well. The European mind had always been fascinated by mysterious cultures, and in the nineteenth century they specifically looked to the cultures of the South and the Far East as their locations of intrigue. To Europeans these sites were not just geographical locations, but “*espacios imaginarios*,” as Aída Sierra Torre describes them (40). They were spaces where it was believed dreams and the most innate desires—whether monetary, sexual, spiritual or other—could become a reality (Sierra Torre 40-41). With colonial expansion and the spread of Europhilic traditions throughout the western—and parts of the eastern—world,

the fascination with the exotic had also become a part of the nineteenth-century mindset on the American continent.

The end of the nineteenth century saw an increase in commercial development in Central America and southern Mexico, and now that these areas were becoming more and more recognized for their natural resources, the region drew many businessmen and curious travelers from the United States, Europe and northern Mexico. Tourism began to increase, and artists and writers alike started to travel to the area, including to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Figarella 197). The artwork and writings of these individuals that described their journeys to Tehuantepec eventually became largely responsible for the myths that later surrounded the location. Writers and artists were fascinated specifically with the Tehuana women and what they perceived as their dark beauty and sensual natures (Debroise 62; Figarella 197). Miguel Covarrubias's description of the region and women of Tehuantepec could be seen as representative of some of these more stereotypical descriptions:

. . . its arid brush, its jungles that seemed lifted from a Rousseau canvas; the Oriental color of its markets, where chattering Indian women, dressed like tropical birds, speak tonal languages reminiscent of China; the majestic bearing and classic elegance of the Tehuantepec women walking to market in stately grace with enormous loads of fruit and flowers on their heads. (xxii)

As artists and writers like Covarrubias focused specifically on the physical appearance of the women and the unique geography of Tehuantepec, descriptions of the region began to be distorted to suit each individual's tastes. The more these exaggerated and often fabricated ideas were published and shared, the more other artists, writers and tourists were attracted to the area. Sierra Torre describes the artists' representations of Tehuantepec as being "*un lugar*

extrañamente mágico, o . . . [un] sitio curioso,” and the Tehuanas were shown to be “*hermosas y bravas, en extremo independientes y sensuales*” (42). This folklore of the Tehuana portrayed her as a beautiful, seductive woman of mystery that also had a tinge of rebellion, and these descriptions seemed to cater perfectly to people’s desire for the exotic (Sierra Torre 48; Debroise 63). At the same time, the actual commercial abilities of the women and their predisposition to run the market and business side of the community also made Tehuantepec’s seemingly matriarchal society fascinating to the outside observer. Although a few decades after Modotti’s time, Carleton Beals, describes this female-operated society similarly to how those in the 1920s observed it:

The women boss Tehuantepec with energy, vivacity, and passion. They do most of the work, all the buying and selling, hold the family purse-strings while pretending that their lazy hammock-lolling husbands are the masters. Daring, full of fire and fun, their tongues are spicy, and they have few inhibitions. (181)

While the men of Tehuantepec were visible, primarily working in the fields, it was the women that garnered all of the attention among the artists of the day (Albers, *Shadows* 223; Argenteri 134).

As depictions of the Tehuana and Tehuantepec landscape began to be frequently used in the country, and also outside of Mexico, the nation as a whole started to be associated with this culture. The country appeared to be moving away from its previous European and colonial image to one that recognized its ancient heritage while also believing in a modern and progressive state. The constructed image of the Tehuana made regular appearances as a representation of Mexico in theater and circus performances (Figarella 198). The government itself even recognized this mental shift in how the country’s identity was being perceived and



Figure 13 Photograph by Tina Modotti, Mural by Diego Rivera, *Subterranean Forces or Subsoil. Nudes floating in flames, represent fire, c. 1926*
Collection Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona

began to appropriate the Tehuana for use as an official nationalist symbol by the end of the Mexican Revolution. A picture of a Tehuana woman was selected for the ten peso bill (Argentero 134). The perpetuated use of this image as an emblem of the new Mexico was a method through which politicians, intellectuals and artists believed that they could justify an entrance into the international arena as their own modern state (Albers, "Tina Modotti" 47; Sierra Torre 42; Debroye 63).

With the growth in popularity of the Tehuana icon in the first half of the twentieth century, there was hardly an artist or writer that didn't have his or her own version of the Tehuana woman (Lozano 98). Diego Rivera's rendering of these women, however, was the one that was most influential in constructing a political meaning for the Tehuana and all indigenous people within the context of the new, Mexican identity (Albers, "Tina Modotti" 47). His interpretation included an exaggerated portrayal of a dark, idyllic beauty known for her participation in an egalitarian, matriarchal society. We saw this early on in his works with *The*

Bather of Tehuantepec in which he showed a nude Tehuana bathing in a river amidst the jungle foliage. As Marnham argues, it was Rivera's study of the Tehuana bather that really started to solidify Rivera's style of women and nudes that he would use throughout his career (166-67). Traces of the Tehuana are unmistakable in *Subterranean Forces* (Figure 13) where we observe similar physical features in Modotti who posed as the model for the central figure. She is shown with dark hair, pigmented skin and completely nude. She is flanked on both sides by two other nude women—perhaps also modeled by Modotti—who seem to be floating through what appears to be a river of fire. As in *The Virgin Earth*, Modotti takes on the exotic and sensuous characteristics of Rivera's bathing Tehuanas as she appears to be at one with the earth and the river.

Rivera's fascination with Tehuantepec—the people and the lifestyle—was not just limited to his murals and other artworks. His belief in the Tehuana way of life was so strong that his expectations even carried into his personal relationships as he encouraged his wife, Frida Kahlo, to dress in the fashion of the region. Much of the commentary even suggests that it was the Tehuana side of Kahlo that Rivera actually loved; whereas, her European side is often seen by scholars as the unloved side (Helm 167-68; Lindauer 144).

Rivera perceived that the community in Tehuantepec had similar values and ideals to those he admired in Marxism, and he believed that this was the political direction the country should take. The implications behind his portrayal of this indigenous group were that it was Tehuantepec, and by extension all indigenous societies, that should be the model of post-Revolutionary ideals in the construction of the new state. In one of his murals, *Corrido de la Revolución* (1928), Rivera even took his portrayal of these women a step further by elevating them to not just a symbol of the Revolution, but to a Mother Earth type that provides temporal

and spiritual nourishment for all Mexicans (Sierra Torre 47). Rivera's mythologized depiction of the Tehuana came to stand not only as the symbol for the entire nation, but it also became the only image that many Mexicans and other international visitors associated with indigenous people. With the repeatedly misconstrued images of the Tehuana, largely due to Rivera's numerous artworks, Albers states, "The Tehuana came to signify the Indian, the common person, true Mexico, as opposed to the colonial, the exploiter, the foreigner" ("Tina Modotti" 47). The Tehuana became a kind of "every woman" that could represent anybody or anything as Mexico moved into the future.

Tina Modotti and the Tehuantepec Women

While it seemed that every location and every person in 1920s Mexico was recovering from the Revolution and was involved in the reconstruction process, Tehuantepec did not appear to be impacted. Despite political events, the rise of modernity and even the repetitive use of the Tehuana image throughout Mexico, Tehuantepec's citizens and culture remained relatively unaffected (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 130). A society such as this one that looked like it was untouched by difficult and ever-pervasive political and social matters must have seemed like a good place for Modotti to go for a reprieve from her challenges. While Modotti continued to take photographs during her time in Tehuantepec, she wasn't concerned about making a political or social statement with her pictures, nor was she interested in perpetuating an ideal. Modotti's Tehuanas stood apart from those that were depicted in the work of other artists who had previously gone to the Isthmus. Rather than emphasizing the beauty and sensuality of the Tehuanas, Modotti was not afraid to portray some of the less glamorous aspects in the lives of these hard-working women. Based on the photographer's impressions, the Tehuanas did not live

a life of luxury in an Edenic setting; she noticed that the daily life and the struggle to provide for themselves and their children was difficult (Figarella 200).

In her Tehuantepec series Modotti tended to photograph mainly women and children, and the men of Tehuantepec are noticeably absent from her pictures. Out of the twenty or so photographs that Modotti took on the Isthmus, men appear in only a few, and then it is only in panoramic festival shots where they are not the main subject (Figarella 200). Modotti was more intent to show the role of women and children that, as Argentero points out, “represent life in various forms.” Argentero continues, they show “the exaltation and continuation of life itself” in spite of the difficulty they have in accomplishing the tasks of a normal day (134). Modotti seemed to focus on the Tehuanas contentedly fulfilling their role as women, though difficult, and these Tehuana characteristics were where she drew her strength.

When developed, however, Modotti’s Tehuantepec pictures often came out blurry or entirely unrecognizable. At times they only showed the backs of the women as they openly evaded or at least did not stop to acknowledge the photographer. Although Modotti admired and respected the Tehuana women, they did not always appreciate her. In one of her letters to Weston that discusses her visit to the area, Modotti included some pictures she had taken while on location. She expressed her concern to her former mentor over the poor quality of her work. She wrote:

I am sending you a few of the snapshots done in T[ehuantepec] . . . of course I have many more done while there, but alas, mostly are in the same condition as the ones I am sending you, either messy or moved, all the exposures had to be done in such a hurry, as soon as they saw me with the camera the women would automatically increase their speed of walking; and they walk swiftly by nature. (*Letters 67*)

By the time Modotti had arrived in Tehuantepec in the late 1920s, the women of the region had consistently been the objects of public scrutiny and misrepresentation for several decades. Modotti's intention was not to mythologize or portray a fabricated lifestyle of these women; in fact, she did quite the opposite in many of her works. However, the Tehuanas were undoubtedly hesitant to allow any foreigner to take their pictures. Occasionally they would even throw stones at the men who had come to Tehuantepec to observe them. Modotti never received such harsh treatment from the Tehuanas—as they were probably more sympathetic to a female artist than a male—and would occasionally get a smile or some other acknowledgement from them; however, it was still difficult for her to get a clean shot and one that she was fully satisfied with (Albers, *Shadows* 223).

Despite this roadblock for Modotti, it provided her with a better opportunity to photograph a more authentic rather than fictionalized depiction of the Tehuanas' daily life that was busy and constantly moving. Modotti depicted women running the markets, bathing themselves and their children in the river, carrying baskets of food and accomplishing other ordinary tasks (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 130,132). Folgarait describes Modotti's Tehuantepec series as showing “a casual recording of appearances and behavior” (*Seeing Mexico* 132). Lowe observes that Modotti depicts the women of this society in a way that is “neither idealized nor trivialized, but presented with sober matter-of-factness, as if to say, here is the proletariat of the proletariat” (42). Modotti saw that the character and lives of these women involved more than just personal grooming and bathing. She tried not to exaggerate and “trivialize” the lives of the Tehuanas as they were often portrayed; however, she is not completely blameless when it comes to idealizing or at least praising this society. Modotti admired the Tehuanas. She saw that they were strong women that relied on each other for support in order to effectively run their lives and

their community. Like Rivera, Modotti, perhaps, misattributed Marxist, egalitarian qualities to this group or at least exaggerated the similarities between the Tehuanas and a Marxist society. In her representations of these women, she recorded them going about their business in a very unassuming way as the model of a Marxist society. Although she did share some of Rivera's misconceptions of Tehuantepec, she continued to strive for the most genuine and authentic portrayal of them as possible, unlike her mentor. By taking a closer look at three of her photographs taken during this period—*Mujeres de Tehuantepec*, *Mujer de Tehuantepec* and *Autorretrato*—we can see that in Modotti's understanding of Tehuantepec all of the women have a specific place, and everyone works together for the benefit of everyone else in the community.

Mujeres de Tehuantepec

Out of all of Modotti's photographs taken in Tehuantepec and throughout her career in Mexico, *Mujeres de Tehuantepec* (Figure 14) is one of her least artistic and appears to be the most uncharacteristic of her usually polished and refined style. However, it seems to speak more about her views towards indigenous people than any of her works. In a very sincere and unobtrusive way, Modotti takes a quick snapshot of two women who are living their lives simply and enjoyably. The importance she places on the daily life of these strong women is noted.

As with many of her Tehuantepec photographs, *Mujeres de Tehuantepec* appears to be spontaneously shot with little thought as to the composition of the photograph, but the nature of the picture allows us to have a perspective of these women that is more genuine and realistic. We see two Tehuana women carrying *jícaras* on their heads full of food or other household products either coming from or going to the market. Through our observation we take an almost voyeuristic role in witnessing their accomplishment of mundane, daily tasks. Yet the younger woman in the photograph still looks directly at us. Even though her direct gaze is most likely

unintentional, it appears as if she knows that someone is watching her, and she doesn't seem to mind. We have caught her in a moment of pleasure, and by her facial expression it is as if she is inviting us to participate in creating a bond with her and the other woman. The invitation to



Figure 14 Tina Modotti, *Mujeres de Tehuantepec*, 1929

participate in this relationship characterized by strength and friendship, undoubtedly impacted Modotti.

From this photograph it is clear that Modotti does not choose to depict these women as living and working in a paradisiacal setting. The *jícaras* look heavy, and the Tehuanas are walking without shoes down a dirty, rocky road as the wind kicks up dust all around them. They are dressed in clothing that is very practical and traditional rather than sensual and exotic as had been

previously depicted by other artists. Their heads are covered, and their dresses conservatively clothe the full length of their bodies. While their clothing is probably based largely on societal traditions, it simultaneously serves a very utilitarian purpose as it protects them from the elements. The impoverished and less than idyllic lifestyle of these women is apparent, but Modotti does not portray them in such a way that evokes feelings of pity. Instead we are faced

with two strong, happy women that command our attention and our respect by the very nature of their way of life.

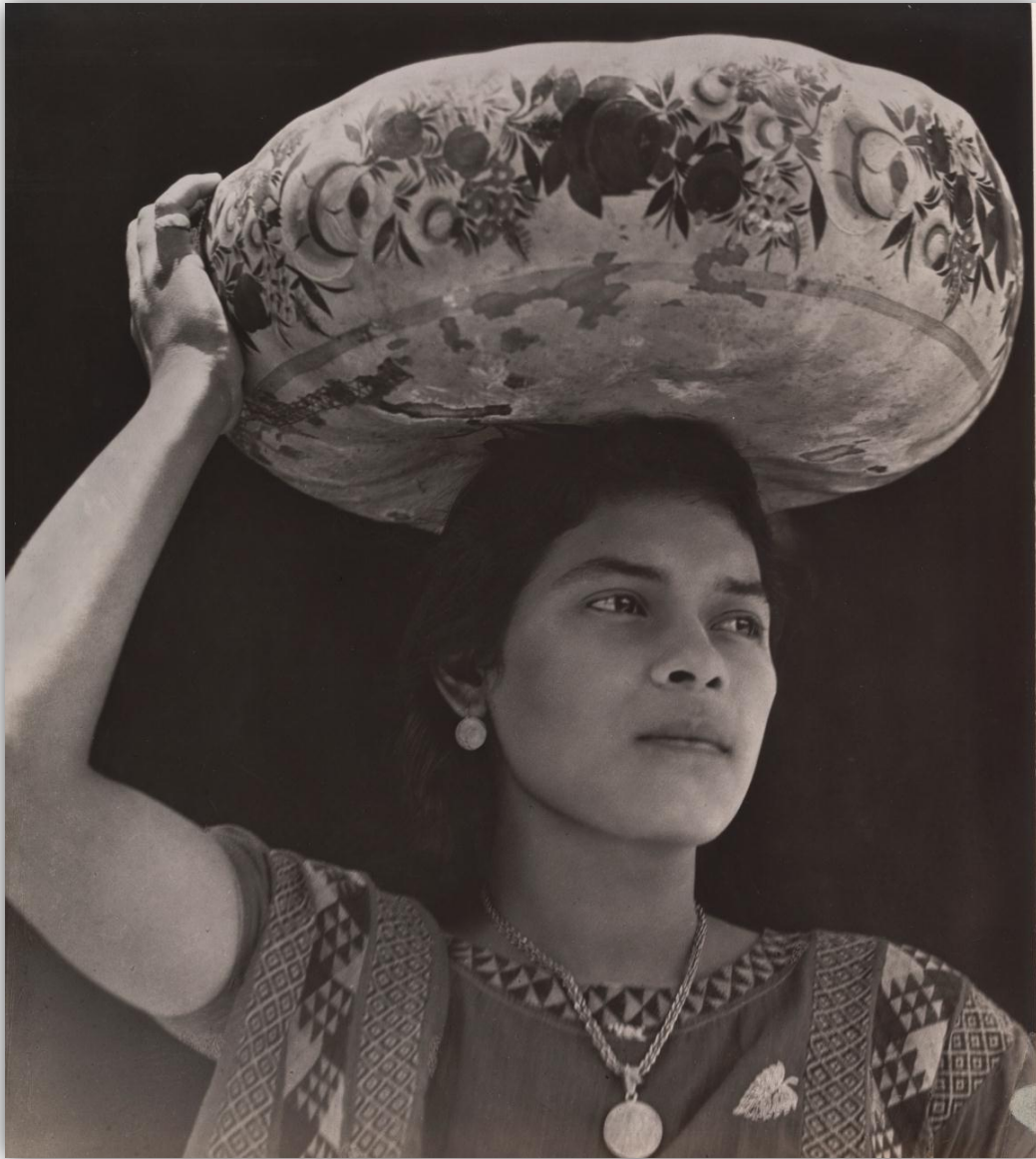
From *Mujeres de Tehuantepec* we also note Figarella's observation when she states that Modotti did not want to represent the “*tipo' popular;*” rather, she shows us “*mujeres fuertes que se ganan la vida duramente y que, con naturalidad amamantan y cuidan a sus hijos*” (Figarella 200). Modotti isn't necessarily interested in the physical beauty of her subjects. In fact, her photograph is completely contrary to the seductive and exotic way Tehuana women were typically depicted by other artists, intellectuals and writers of the day. Photographers such as William Henry Jackson and Charles B. Waite and, of course, the muralist Rivera were known to frequently show the women nude and bathing. Their works focused on the bodies, and, particularly, the breasts of the women, but rarely, if ever, did they show the difficulties of the Tehuanas' lives (Debroise 67). The women in Modotti's photograph, however, look like they have experienced the rigors of life and continue to experience them as they walk through these dust-filled streets. The woman on the left of the photograph appears to be older, a little heavier set and definitely more wrinkled than the Tehuanas that graced the walls of the Ministry of Education. The woman on the right is younger, but we see that she is very plain and homely looking. She possesses few of the refined features of the mythologized Tehuana. Even though they do not capture our attention with striking physical attributes, both women go about their work and even walk with an air of confidence, which Modotti admires in them. Folgarait explains the inherent nature of the Tehuana women: “These women possessed unusual political power in their society and ran it according to ancient rules of matriarchy. They also conducted this power with great self-possessiveness, pride, and grace” (*Seeing Mexico* 132). These characteristics are evidenced in the self-assured women of Modotti's photograph that understand

who they are within the bounds of their culture—a culture that has continued since antiquity. Through them we see this legacy of a strong society. We see the past embodied in the older woman, and through the image of the younger woman, we see that these powerful Tehuanas will continue to conduct the affairs of their community according to ancient traditions. They show confidence in themselves, and because of this we see a permanence and resiliency in their culture's identity.

Mujer de Tehuantepec

Due to the cautious nature of the Tehuana women and their hurried lifestyle, Modotti's photographs in Tehuantepec were often improvised, and very rarely did her subjects pose for her. Nevertheless, she did manage to take some portraits that were done in her classic style, carefully composed and organized. The iconic Tehuantepec photograph that perhaps represents with the most clarity her approach to a specific individual is *Mujer de Tehuantepec* (Figure 15) (Lowe 42). The photograph is a medium shot of a young woman dressed in the typical Tehuana blouse carrying a *xicaplextele* (a container for transporting food or other goods) on her head. This picture, in many ways, seems to contradict itself in that it shows respect for the indigenous woman, but at the same time, the composition of the frame seems to reinforce the idealized representations of the Tehuana that had been done by other artists, including Rivera.

Unlike *Mujeres de Tehuantepec* Modotti has carefully organized *Mujer de Tehuantepec* in a way that gives us an idealistic vision of the women of this society. Modotti takes the photograph from a low angle, which automatically elevates the Tehuana to a higher status. By the composition we are also led to focus on the face of the woman as the *xicaplextele*, her shoulders and her arm create a natural frame around her face that looks off into the distance. Sarah Lowe suggests that through her face and the dominance of her body we are able to see the



**Figure 15 Tina Modotti, Tehuantepec Type [woman holding bundle on head] (*Mujer de Tehuantepec*), c. 1929
gelatin silver photograph; 8 1/4 x 7 3/8" (21 x 18.7 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A., Anonymous Gift
Digital Image ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY**

significant voice that these women had in their society (42). Through this compositional technique, Modotti, in some ways, contributes to the mythologized image of the Tehuana woman by focusing on her inherent beauty, the indigenous style of her clothing and her hard-working predisposition. It almost gives us the impression that this is the representation of the ideal and

archetypal Mexican woman of the new state—strong, beautiful and indigenous. Figarella explains that this photograph “*no escapa al estereotipo de la representación del tipo pintoresco . . . en [la] afán nacionalista de dignificar la raza nativa*” (201). Although this photograph is a dignified portrayal of a Tehuana woman, in many ways it seems closer to the representations of the Tehuanas that Rivera did that included a beautiful and idealized indigenous woman dressed in traditional clothing.

An interesting thing that Modotti does to perpetuate the myth of the archetypal indigenous individual—while at the same time referencing Rivera’s portrayals of indigenous culture—is the use of the *xicaplextele* on the head of the woman in this photograph. We can obviously tell through the inclusion of this detail that the Tehuanas were hard-working, industrious people. While that understanding of this culture is legitimate, and indeed necessary, Modotti’s *xicaplextele* also reminds the viewer of the sombrero that indigenous men were often portrayed wearing in Post-Revolutionary artwork. Throughout Post-Revolutionary art, and primarily the work of Rivera, sombreros are a repeated and prominent motif and serve as symbols of the indigenous and the proposed position for those cultures in the new, Mexican nation. We saw these same emblematic sombreros earlier in Rivera’s *Flower Festival* and in his *Distribution of the Arms* as they promoted Rivera’s revolutionary ideas and showed his affinity towards indigenous races. Through the use of the sombrero reference, the Tehuana clothing and the natural beauty of the woman being photograph, Modotti plays with the idea of this “well-known Mexican-type” that Rivera perpetuated (Lowe 42). She, too, connects the Tehuana back to the Revolution and emphasizes the position of the indigenous woman in Mexican society and in the new state.



Figure 16 Tina Modotti, Untitled ["Costume from Tehuantepec"] (*Autorretrato*), n.d. gelatin silver print; 3 1/2 in. x 2 1/2 in. (8.89 cm x 6.35 cm) San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchase through a gift of the Art Supporting Foundation, John "Launny" Steffens, Sandra Lloyd, Shawn and Brook Byers, Mr. and Mrs. George F. Jewett, Jr., and anonymous donors

Despite some of the signals from this photograph that associate it with Rivera's mythology of the Tehuana, Modotti still portrays the subject as an individual without playing to the sensuality that the muralist was known for. Sierra Torre explains that through the low-angle composition, you can actually see the admiration that Modotti has for the Tehuana.

Sierra Torre explains, "*El uso de las convenciones visuales de la pintura y la escultura para fotografiarla en 'lo alto,' su porte distinguido y su mirada lejana, hacen que sea una imagen más*

que para mostrarse, para ser contemplada" (51). Modotti doesn't want to construct a photograph that is only concerned with the appearance of the Tehuana. Rather, the distinct look of the woman as she gazes off into the distance and her facial expression, which appears to be one of deep contemplation or perhaps concern, provides a more thought-provoking image rather than just simply playing to indigenous stereotypes. While it is clear that Modotti has portrayed

the Tehuana in a way that shows her inherent beauty and traditional clothing, Modotti hasn't removed her from her traditional setting or traditional role as a working member of society. In some ways it seems that this Tehuana represents not just the woman specifically shown in the picture, but it is likely that Modotti uses her as a symbol of any indigenous and Mexican woman at any time and in any place throughout the country (Sierra Torre 51). Not only can this woman be seen as representing any Mexican woman, she can also be seen as representing Modotti herself, or the woman that Modotti wishes and hopes to become. Like this woman, Modotti, at this time in her life, is also looking into a future of uncertainty with perhaps some anxiety; however, this Tehuana seems confident in herself and does not seem fearful. She is a strong woman that has embraced the traditions and values of her culture which will carry her into that future, and this is what Modotti is hoping she will attain as a result of living and working among these women.

Autorretrato

One of the most unique photographs from Modotti's years in Mexico is the rare—if not only—self-portrait that was taken during her time in Tehuantepec (Figure 16). The picture is taken in a full shot—which places a specific emphasis on the photographer's attire—as she looks directly into the camera with one hand behind her back perhaps to trip the shutter (Albers, *Shadows* 223-24). The photograph is unique in that it gives us Modotti's interpretation of herself, but it is also interesting to note that she chooses to wear the traditional clothing of a Tehuana woman. Modotti dresses in a customary Tehuana blouse and skirt that were often characterized by bright colors and abstract and elaborate motifs. While she doesn't wear the heavy, Tehuana stone jewelry or the braided hair on top of her head, Modotti's connection to the women of this society is unmistakable in this picture (Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 132, 134).

Not only is this the only self-portrait of Modotti that we are aware of, but it is the first and the last documented time where she is proudly wearing the Tehuana blouse and skirt. Despite the fact that Modotti dressing like this is probably a one-time occurrence, this picture is still reminiscent of another Mexican artist at the time known for her consistent use of the Tehuana clothing. The painter Frida Kahlo was not just known for often depicting herself wearing the Tehuana attire, as seen in the 1931 *Frida and Diego Rivera* (their wedding portrait) (Figure 17), but she was also famous for wearing this clothing and her hair in the Tehuana fashion on a daily basis, as seen in Lola Alvarez Bravo's photograph of her taken around 1944 (Figure 18). In fact, Kahlo's choice of wardrobe even inspired European fashion and other women throughout Mexico and Europe to utilize indigenous clothing regularly (Albers, "Tina Modotti" 51).



Figure 17 Frida Kahlo, *Frida (Frieda) and Diego Rivera*, 1931
In ARTstor. 31 August 2011; Available from ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York

Through her use of the Tehuana clothing, Kahlo exhibited a display of Post-Revolutionary nationalism and a sense of respect for indigenous culture. While these objectives were undoubtedly important to the young artist, her choice of wardrobe was also worn as a way to please her husband, Diego Rivera, who was fixated with indigenous society. Additionally, it was used as a means of her own self-identification. We can see through her clothing that Kahlo

created an identity that was dependent on her appropriation and interpretation of the indigenous lifestyle and clothing (Andrade 89; Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico* 134).



Figure 18 Lola Alvarez Bravo, *Frida Kahlo*, c. 1944
Collection Center for Creative Photography
The University of Arizona
©1995 The University of Arizona Foundation

Throughout her life Frida Kahlo experienced poor health and a series of accidents that led to a self-conscious view of herself—an insecurity that was often candidly expressed through her self-portraits. Kahlo, however, was primarily fixated on how her husband viewed her, and this concern was perhaps exacerbated by his numerous affairs. She demonstrates her preoccupation with Rivera’s affection in one of her best-known self-portraits, *The Two Fridas* (Figure 19), painted in 1939 around the time of her divorce from Rivera. In this portrait, the artist depicts

herself twice, once in a European-style dress and the other in a Tehuana skirt and blouse. Both women have their heart exposed to the viewer. The Tehuana Kahlo is holding a small portrait of Rivera as a young boy, and the artery leaving this portrait is what is supplying blood, and by extension life, to both Kahlos. The European Kahlo, on the other hand, is holding a surgical clamp that is trying to stop the bleeding from another artery; the two Kahlos are dying from within. In December 1939 the North American art historian MacKinley Helm met Kahlo while she was painting this portrait. He was aware of the impending divorce and viewed *The Two*

Fridas in light of these circumstances. He described the Tehuana Frida as the one that “Diego had loved” and the European Frida as “the woman whom Diego no longer loves” (167-68). From the time that Helm made his statement, scholars have continued to refer to *The Two Fridas* as the portrait of the loved and the unloved Kahlo (Ankori 161). This painting suggests the dual natures that Kahlo saw to be struggling within herself. The European side of her was the weak, rejected side, but it was the indigenous Kahlo that felt strong and loved (Helm 167-68; Lindauer 144-46). Sierra Torre suggests that Kahlo frequently portraying herself dressed as a Tehuana woman was “*una manera de ubicarse individual y socialmente, de presentarse a sí y a los otros. La adopción deliberada y personal de dicha indumentaria expresaba su deseo de ser parecida a aquellas mujeres que provocaban encanto y admiración*” (52). As Kahlo saw herself as an invalid and an incomplete woman, it was perhaps through the imitation of a beautiful, sensual and self-assured Tehuana—and not unimportantly, women that Rivera was attracted to—that Kahlo was able to see herself as attractive and whole (Sierra Torre 52-53).

Kahlo adjusted her wardrobe as a means of self-identification and a way to rid herself of some insecurities, and Modotti’s intent for wearing the clothing wasn’t entirely different from Kahlo’s. In some ways Modotti did perhaps dress herself like the Tehuanas simply to satisfy a curiosity, and she certainly showed her admiration and respect for these matriarchs by imitating them (Flogarait, *Seeing Mexico* 132). But Modotti, like Kahlo, seemed to use the clothing as a symbolic strengthening exercise. By taking on the clothing of the Tehuana women she shows that she is symbolically taking on herself their strength and resilient nature as well.

There are two things that demand our attention from this photograph. The first is the obvious use of the Tehuana clothing, and the second is the uncharacteristic smile that Modotti has on her face. The year that Modotti went to Tehuantepec had been a difficult one for the



Figure 19 Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939
In ARTstor. 30 August 2011; Available from ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York

photographer, and she had come to the community in some ways to seek refuge and healing following the death of Mella. She continued to be deeply entrenched in the turbulent political atmosphere in 1920's Mexico, even though she knew that she was going to be expelled from the country at any moment. Confronting this difficult prospect, Modotti needed some additional fortification before facing an uncertain future alone. Folgarait suggests that one of the reasons Modotti chose to wear the Tehuana clothing was as a display of her veneration for these women who possessed such political power in their community. As Modotti was deeply involved in her

political beliefs and felt strongly about the causes she fought for, it would be natural for her, in the midst of such a difficult political situation, to want to identify herself with such proud and confident indigenous women who demonstrated a unique feminine power (*Seeing Mexico* 132). Albers proposes that by wearing the Tehuana clothing Modotti is able to assume some of the strength that comes from these women as a mechanism for healing, and she also argues that this exercise shows Modotti's affinity for and her deep love of the indigenous people and Mexico in general. Albers states that the timing of this photograph is significant in that Modotti pictures herself "in 'quintessentially Mexican' dress, [and] . . . declares a deep and abiding identification for the country that she now knew she would have to leave. The image is a spiritual passport, and a talisman of her love for the Mexican people" (Albers, *Shadows* 224). This photograph shows Modotti gaining strength from these women, but at the same time it shows her love for and dedication to the country. While it could be argued that through this photograph Modotti's *indigenismo* advocates a complete adoption of indigenous customs by the Mexican population at large, I do not believe that this is her intention. If this were the case, it seems that Modotti would have been more intent on regularly wearing the Tehuana clothing and more overtly showing her own adoption of these practices throughout her time in Mexico. Rather, Modotti shows that she respects and admires this culture and that we should in some ways emulate the strong egalitarian nature of their community, but that does not mean that we need to do it at the expense of our own heritage.

The other unusual aspect of this photograph is the uncharacteristic smile that Modotti wears. In the photographs that we do have of Modotti and in many of the portraits that she took of other individuals, the subjects are often shown not smiling and in fact usually wear an expression that is more serious. However, in this self-portrait and in other photographs taken in

Tehuantepec, Modotti is smiling as are many of the Tehuana women. Here, Modotti looks content and at peace with this moment in her life. Comparing this portrait to her other Tehuantepec photographs, Modotti is not just wearing the dress of a Tehuana—an external characteristic—it seems that she has also taken on the more profound Tehuana characteristic of quiet confidence. Some of the personal pain that she has experienced over the last year has gone for at least a moment in favor of a deeper contented feeling (Albers, *Shadows* 224). With her symbolic dress and the small smile on her face, Modotti has taken upon herself the strength of these women through her imitation of them.

Although Modotti's Tehuantepec photographs take on a slightly different tone and artistic style from her earlier works, her interpretation of the indigenous people remains consistent. She sees them as individuals that confidently understand who they are as part of a larger community. She admires how each person works together for the good of the whole as they accomplish their individual tasks. Modotti went to Tehuantepec in some ways to rest from her own personal challenges. While there she found a people that she respected, and through the fortitude of the women she was able to regain some of her own strength that she had lost during that particularly difficult year. After her visit to Tehuantepec, she was ready to return to Mexico City “at peace with herself and ready to continue pursuing Mella's and her [political] struggle” (Argentero 134).

CONCLUSION

Modotti returned from Tehuantepec in the autumn of 1929, and by the end of February of the following year, she found herself as a third-class passenger on a Dutch freighter heading for Rotterdam. Modotti had been deported from Mexico under suspicion for conspiracy to murder the Mexican president, Pascual Ortíz Rubio (Albers, *Shadows* 225, 234; Constantine 154). She stayed away from the country for nearly a decade as she worked throughout Europe for International Red Aid. Much of her time with Red Aid was spent in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, which she saw as part of the fascists' attempt at oppressing the proletariat. Modotti's contribution during the war was mostly through her medical and humanitarian efforts, but she also participated in counterespionage activities and intelligence work. By 1939, however, Red Aid was in demise, and the photographer had to quickly evacuate Spain (Albers, *Shadows* 286, 301, 307). Eventually Modotti returned illegally to Mexico in April 1939 under the name of Dr. Carmen Ruíz Sánchez, and she spent the remainder of her days there trying to avoid being caught by the Mexican government. The experiences that Modotti had during her time in Europe—especially throughout the Spanish Civil War—seemed to have changed and exhausted her. When she returned to Mexico her appearance had been dramatically altered, and many friends and comrades noticed that she was anxious and even fearful at the prospect of being discovered in the country (Albers, *Shadows* 312-13).

Although Modotti continued her anti-fascist activities once in Mexico, she lived a relatively quiet life and hoped to return to Italy someday (Constantine 185). She even took up photography again which she had done very little of during her time in Europe, and as Constantine states, Modotti “went off . . . to record with her own vision and sensitivity the arts and crafts of Mexico and the people who produced them in their own environment” (186).

Almost a decade had passed since Modotti had any significant interaction with Mexican indigenous groups. It is interesting to note that upon her return following several years of intense and, at times, dangerous political activities, she chose to focus on the people and cultures of Mexico.

When Modotti initially accompanied Weston to Mexico, it was because of her fascination with the cultural renaissance that was spreading throughout that country. She was intrigued by the artistic and socially liberal vision that she observed among the artists there, particularly among *Los Tres Grandes*. What Modotti didn't expect was the connection that she would have with the poorer classes—and particularly the indigenous people—of Mexican society, and these individuals became a primary focus of her work. Argenteri notes that while Modotti's companion, Edward Weston, was preoccupied with form and composition rather than imparting a message through his photography "Modotti was concentrating her attention on the oppressed, the marginal, the exploited, the poor, carefully choosing her subjects, her rich compositions, and her structures as if she were establishing a political dialogue with the poor of the world."

Argenteri continues, "After all, to take a photograph is to create a bond with the photographed. . . . Thus we never see Tina lecturing in her pictures, but only sharing. We see that she identified with the silence of the people" (131). Having grown up in poorer circumstances herself, Modotti related to anyone in Mexico that had been marginalized. She was sympathetic toward indigenous individuals, specifically, and her philosophy of *indigenismo* and the dignity she observed among these groups echoed throughout her works. While many scholars have studied Modotti, very little has been written about her photographs of indigenous subjects. As indigenous people appear very early in her career and remain a consistent theme,

and considering that *indigenismo* was such a large issue in 1920's Mexico, this study has sought to correct this oversight in Modotti scholarship.

Modotti valued the nature of indigenous communities and the Marxist-egalitarian societal structures she perceived among them, and it was her desire to portray them in the most genuine and authentic way possible. She endeavored to create "honest photographs without distortions or manipulations" (Modotti, "On Photography" 260). While Modotti did strive for an authentic portrayal and genuine view of the indigenous lifestyle, her works are not entirely devoid of manipulation and at times exaggeration. We have seen this in pictures such as *Worker's Parade* in which the photograph was cropped and altered during the development process. In *Mujer de Tehuantepec* we have seen how Modotti posed her subject and composed other elements in her picture to give an idealized view of indigenous women. And through a multitude of other photographs, we have seen how Modotti tried to give the impression that indigenous communities were the ideal representations of proto-Marxist societies that all people should strive to emulate. In reality, Modotti was not indigenous herself, and even though she sympathized with their plight, she really did not know what it was like to be a culturally oppressed, indigenous Mexican. Instead, she was accustomed to interacting with the Mexican elite and living in Mexico City with all of its modern conveniences.

While Modotti did perhaps give off some inaccurate impressions of indigenous societies, I don't necessarily believe it was her intention to distort indigenous culture. Rather, it seems that she attempted to grant recognition to and depict an authentic vision of indigenous communities that had been marginalized and forgotten about for centuries. Additionally, when compared to the artists that had come before her Modotti's *indigenismo* was perhaps a more enlightened and sympathetic one. However, she didn't come to Mexico having already formulated her own

philosophy of *indigenismo*; it developed over time. As Mexico was seeking to rebuild its national infrastructure and create its own identity following the Revolution of 1910, *indigenismo* was a philosophy that many government officials, intellectuals and artists saw as a means for the country to redefine what it meant to be Mexican. Proponents of *indigenismo* believed that it was through the indigenous culture, past and present, that Mexico would be able to recreate itself while launching into the modern age. Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Xavier Guerrero and others influenced and perhaps even tutored Modotti when it came to her political and *indigenista* views. Diego Rivera, specifically, had the largest impact on her, and her vision of a Marxist, egalitarian social structure among the Mexican indigenous can be traced back to him. However, Rivera, like other artists, often exaggerated or altered his depictions of indigenous people from the reality. Through her more realistic approach Modotti tried to counter how Rivera and other artists portrayed these people in an overly positive or an overly negative way. While her work is not an entirely accurate depiction of indigenous society nor does it speak from a completely indigenous perspective, her photography gives a clearer and perhaps fairer view of these communities.

During her time in Mexico, Modotti also interacted regularly with members of other political and social movements. Early on she formed associations with the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors—of which Rivera was a founding member—and the *estridentistas*. Both the Syndicate and the *estridentistas* helped to provide an ideological foundation for Modotti during her first few years in Mexico. They viewed the proletariat as a valid and important member of society that would help create social changes, and these ideas resonated with the young photographer. However, it was through Modotti's work with Weston on Anita Brenner's *Idols Behind Altars* project that we see a change in her art. On this trip

Modotti produced some of her first photographs that aligned with her later views of *indigenismo*. Rather than focusing solely on composition and form in her art, similar to Weston, Modotti began to concentrate more on individuals and their lives. During the first half of the *Idols Behind Altars* tour, Modotti, like Weston, was more intent to photograph Mexican art and architecture, but through more personal photographs sent back to the Richey family, we have observed how Modotti's *indigenista* values began to develop. Her photographs of fishermen, musicians, people in a market and others show her admiration for the indigenous Mexicans with whom she came in contact. Modotti was impressed with their style of living and by focusing on indigenous people in her work in a way that was unobtrusive and genuine, she made other Mexicans aware of them.

The *Idols Behind Altars* project was only a starting point for Modotti's expression of her *indigenismo*. Within a few years of finishing her work on Brenner's book, Modotti became a contributing editor to *Mexican Folkways*, a journal created by the American Frances Toor. Toor loved Mexican art and culture and wanted to make the folklore of the indigenous people available to her fellow Americans. She also wanted to create a location for Mexican artists, writers and intellectuals of the day to share their ideas and their work relating to the indigenous. Like Toor and some of the other contributors, Modotti was fascinated with the indigenous people of Mexico who were often overlooked and marginalized politically, educationally and artistically. Because she could empathize, to a degree, with these individuals, Modotti didn't want to just create pictures of them and their customs. Instead, she tried to use her photography to fight for their rights as well. With pictures such as *Worker's Parade*, the *Alegorías de la Revolución* series and other works published in *Mexican Folkways*, specifically, Modotti sent a political message to state officials and the elite classes. She reminded them of the previously silenced

indigenous people while simultaneously condemning government systems and others who had neglected them.

As we have seen with her *Mexican Folkways* works, Modotti did use her camera to send specific political and social messages, but she also used her photography for very personal reasons. However, her views of *indigenismo* and even her artistic style and compositional techniques remained pretty consistent throughout her career. I have shown this primarily through an analysis of Modotti's Tehuantepec photographs. Modotti went to Tehuantepec following a particularly difficult year that included the death of Julio Antonio Mella and her arrest and trial for being suspected of his murder. During her time in Tehuantepec, the photographer continued to carefully compose her images, but she was also more spontaneous in many of her shots, some of which give us a unique and more authentic view of the Tehuana society. Rather than just focusing on the women's exotic and sensual physical features, like other artists prior to her had done, Modotti depicted the hard working nature and daily lives of these women. She showed that there is dignity in caring for children, running a household and leading a community. Perhaps the more significant reason behind Modotti's trip to Tehuantepec, however, was the personal purpose behind these photographs. Modotti used the Tehuanas as her own example of fortitude and strength despite their potential physical and emotional challenges. Through her pictures Modotti was able to relate to these Tehuana women and to gain strength from them prior to her deportation.

Following the Spanish Civil War Modotti was only in Mexico for a few years before her death on the evening of January 5, 1942. Many friends and associates mourned the loss of such a great artist. In her book on Modotti, Constantine includes an homage that was shared by Manuel Alvarez Bravo at a memorial service and posthumous exhibition of Modotti's works. He states:

More than by death, Tina's work was cut short by the fact that her life had gone in other directions; still, in the short time that she was an active photographer, she was able to create a body of work which remains the lesson of her understanding and her love of the methods and orientation most appropriate to the field . . . She combined human document, technical maturity, plastic surety, mastery of her medium; all these brought together in this exhibition, which is both a stimulus and an homage. (189)

Perhaps the most familiar tribute to Modotti was given by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, and many writers and scholars have used phrases from this poem as titles for books and articles written about the photographer. Neruda writes:

Perfect your gentle name,
perfect your fragile life
—bees, shadows, fire,
snow, silence and foam combining
with steel and wire and
pollen to make up your firm
and delicate being. (qtd. in Constantine 190-91)

Although Modotti's work was forgotten for decades, her photography is still just as relevant today as it was during the 1920s. Through her camera lens we are able to have a clearer understanding of Mexican indigenous culture following the Revolution and the impact that those groups had on the country as a whole. In recent years many have started to realize as Alvarez Bravo and Neruda did that through Modotti's photography we are able to see Mexico and its people—particularly its indigenous people—in a new light.

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