

Supported by



## BARBICAN ART GALLERY

### **Tina Modotti and Edward Weston: The Mexico Years**

29 April – 1 August 2004

Barbican Art Gallery re-opens on 29 April 2004, after a closure of 11 months, with a greatly enhanced and more flexible gallery. The £1million project (fully funded by the Corporation of London) designed by architects Allford Hall Monaghan Morris, has provided an additional 140 sq metres of display area with the sealing of the central void and the removal of the large staircase down to the Library. A new seamless resin floor surface, by Absolute Floors, the exposure of original concrete features and a new spacious reception area will further improve the space and visitor experience.

The two opening exhibitions: **Tina Modotti and Edward Weston: The Mexico Years** and **Helen Chadwick: A Retrospective** will demonstrate the new adaptability of the space. The upper level of the gallery will show the rare photographs by Tina Modotti and Edward Weston, and the lower floor will display a retrospective of Helen Chadwick including large installations which would have been difficult to accommodate before the refurbishment.

#### **EXHIBITION – INTRODUCTION**

**Tina Modotti and Edward Weston: The Mexico Years** brings together, for the first time, over 150 images, many rarely exhibited, by the two key figures of Mexican Modernist photography. The exhibition will demonstrate how each artist responded to, and participated in, The Mexican Renaissance in post-Revolutionary Mexico during the 1920s. Works by Manuel Álvarez Bravo (1902-2002) and Mariana Yampolsky (1925-2002) - Mexican photographers who were directly influenced by the work of Modotti and Weston will complement the display.

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**Tina Modotti** (1896-1942) is probably ‘the best known unknown photographer’ of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her dramatic life marked by her passionate affair with Edward Weston (1886-1958) and her affiliation with communism, has, until recently, detracted others from her singular contribution to the modern photography after her premature death in 1942.

Modotti’s photographic career spanned just 7 years (1923-30), and yet she produced a body of work that defined a Modernist photographic aesthetic within Mexican culture as she united her political passions in her artistic production. Initially Weston’s model, Modotti began as his apprentice and studio assistant and became an accomplished photographer. Her work includes poignant still-lives, Modernist images of workers and revolutionary icons. In 1930, just as her international reputation as a photographer reached a height, she was expelled from Mexico for her political activities, and, unable to work as a photographer abroad, she committed herself to working with the disenfranchised in communist Russia and Germany. After nearly fifty years of obscurity, it was only in the 1980s and early ‘90s that Modotti’s work began to receive public attention. It is a testament to both the importance of her work and its rarity that in 1991 her image *Roses* (1925) achieved the highest price ever paid for a single photograph at auction.

In contrast, **Edward Weston** (1886-1958), recognised as one of the masters of 20<sup>th</sup> century photography, left a legacy that includes a collection of several thousand photographs, many of them icons of American Modernist photography. Although Weston only spent three years working in Mexico during his long career, its significance to his aesthetic is visible in the work that followed. He was captivated by the vast landscapes, imposing pre-Columbian architecture, artisan objects and murals, and his work showed a significant transition from narrative Pictorialism to his own style of Modernism, leading to some of his best-known work: close-up still-lives of shells and peppers and his renowned landscapes.

## **EXHIBITION STRUCTURE**

### ***Prelude to Mexico: Los Angeles 1919-23***

The exhibition begins with photographs that set the social and artistic scene of the early 1920s in Los Angeles, where Modotti and Weston met. In 1910 Weston began his career as a portrait photographer and by 1912 he had opened his own studio. Under the influence of his studio partner, Margrethe Mather, he moved away from a soft focused imagery, and increasingly toward a Japanese-influenced structure. Italian-born, Modotti had immigrated to San Francisco at the age of 16 in 1913, and had begun a successful acting career. She met Robo Richey, a self-made Bohemian painter and poet and in 1918 they moved to Los Angeles, where Modotti found several film roles in the burgeoning film industry. She had her first starring role in *The Tiger’s Coat*, which was premiered in 1920 in which she plays the lead role in a story of mistaken identity (a video of the film will be shown in the exhibition). Their circle of friends included Mexican exile Ricardo Gómez Robelo as well as artists, writers and painters. In the spring of 1921, Modotti began modelling for Weston and soon their romantic relationship began.

Shown alongside examples of Weston’s work from this period, are photographs by his colleagues, Johan Hagemeyer, Margrethe Mather and Jane Reece among others.

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***Mexican Years Together 1923-26***

Post-revolutionary Mexico was experiencing the fervent currents of artistic, political and social reforms and Richey, Modotti and Weston began discussing a move there to explore artistic opportunities. Richey went in late 1921, but died unexpectedly early in 1922. In his brief time there, he had begun to organise an exhibition of painting, batik and photographs (by Weston and others) and Modotti resolved to see the show through when she arrived shortly before his death. She returned to California and resumed her romantic relationship with Weston.

In August 1923 Modotti and Weston arrived in Mexico City and set up a photography studio where Modotti was business partner and studio manager, and in return, Weston taught her photography. They were in a vibrant artistic environment and were drawn to the circle of activist artists such as Diego Rivera, Jean Charlot, Xavier Guerrero, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

This key section will examine the artistic development of the two photographers. Weston worked on a range of new subject matter in Mexico, and although Modotti's style evolved from Weston's aesthetic principles, it was distinguishable. Works feature the subjects that engaged both Modotti and Weston during this period: architecture, still-lives and portraits. Their photographs will be shown side-by-side where possible to show their different approaches to similar subjects. Also featured in this section are a series of Weston's portraits and nude studies of Modotti as well as their collaborative project in 1926 to photograph the arts, architecture and crafts of Mexico, commissioned for Anita Brenner's book, *Idols Behind Alters*.

***Modotti in Mexico 1926-30***

This section follows Modotti's career in Mexico after Weston's departure in late 1926. Their personal lives and artistic directions were taking different paths and by that time Modotti had established her reputation as an exceptional photographer in Mexico City. In 1927 she joined the Mexican Communist Party and became a contributing editor and photographer for *Mexican Folkways* magazine, which promoted Mexico's indigenous art and culture (Diego Rivera was art editor). Examples of Modotti's images which document Rivera and his colleagues' mural paintings are featured in this section. With her deepening involvement in revolutionary politics, the content of Modotti's work became increasingly socio-political.

Modotti's career ended abruptly in 1930, when she was expelled from the country as a result of her associations with radical politics. Many of Modotti's photographs from this period show social scenes, proletarian activities and the movements of crowds, celebrating Mexico's ordinary men, women, and children. Her composed works such as *Bandolier, Guitar, Sickle* (1927) are simple but carry a strong political message with eloquent symbolism.

***Weston after Mexico: California 1926-early 1930s***

In November 1926 Weston arrived back in California, where he began rebuilding his clientele. Throughout this period, Weston and Modotti stayed in touch as friends and professional colleagues. Weston began to take close-up photographs of single objects such as shells, vegetables and household utensils, followed by close-ups of cypresses, rocks and kelp. Weston detached his subjects from their ordinary contexts, focussing on their formal qualities. The works in this section will include Weston's experiments with shells, vegetables and rocks as well as nude studies.

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### ***Modotti and Weston: Legacy in Mexican Photography***

This small section will feature works by two Mexican photographers, Manuel Álvarez Bravo (1902-2002) and Mariana Yampolsky (1925-2002). Álvarez Bravo began photographing during the mid-1920s at the height of the Mexican Renaissance. Modotti helped the young Álvarez Bravo shape his career by urging him to pursue his craft and making an introduction to Weston back in California. When Modotti was expelled from Mexico, Álvarez Bravo took over Modotti's position as contributing editor for *Mexican Folkways* and her project to photograph murals.

Born in Chicago, Yampolsky moved to Mexico City in the 1940s. She worked as a designer and illustrator at the Popular Graphics Workshop, where she met Manuel Álvarez Bravo and began photographing under his influence. Her photographs, often of women, are humanistic visions of Mexico and its rich cultural heritage.

### **Exhibition Organisation**

The works are drawn from many public and private collections including The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The J. Paul Getty Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Center for Creative Photography, Arizona. The Guest Curator of the exhibition is American art historian, Sarah M. Lowe, organiser of the first Tina Modotti retrospective in 1995 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and author of books on Weston and Frida Kahlo. The exhibition is organised by Barbican Art Gallery.

### **Catalogue**

A 160 page catalogue, containing 150 illustrations, is published by Merrell in association with the Barbican Art Gallery to accompany the exhibition, price £24.95 in paperback (available only at the exhibition), £29.95 in hardback.

### **Associated events**

To complement the exhibition, and as part of the Gallery's Wednesday evening programme of events, a series of gallery talks covering a range of themes raised in the exhibition will take place. A family workshop weekend is also planned.

### **Cinema**

A season of new contemporary Mexican cinema will be programmed to accompany the exhibition. Details to be confirmed.

### **Sponsors**

Associate partner of the exhibition is AXA Art the leading insurer dedicated to museums, galleries and private collectors throughout the world. Clare Parry, the company's Development Director says: "We are thrilled to support the Barbican in this ground-breaking exploration of two of the finest photographers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It presents a rare opportunity to compare and contrast the artists' work and to assess the considerable impact they had on their contemporaries, later generations, and on the appreciation and value of photography on the art market today."

### **Opening Times/Admission**

Monday-Sunday 10am-6pm; Late night Wednesday 10am-9pm

Tickets: £8; £6 concessions (also admits to Helen Chadwick: A Retrospective)

**Public information/advance tickets: 0845 1207550**

### **Media Information:**

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