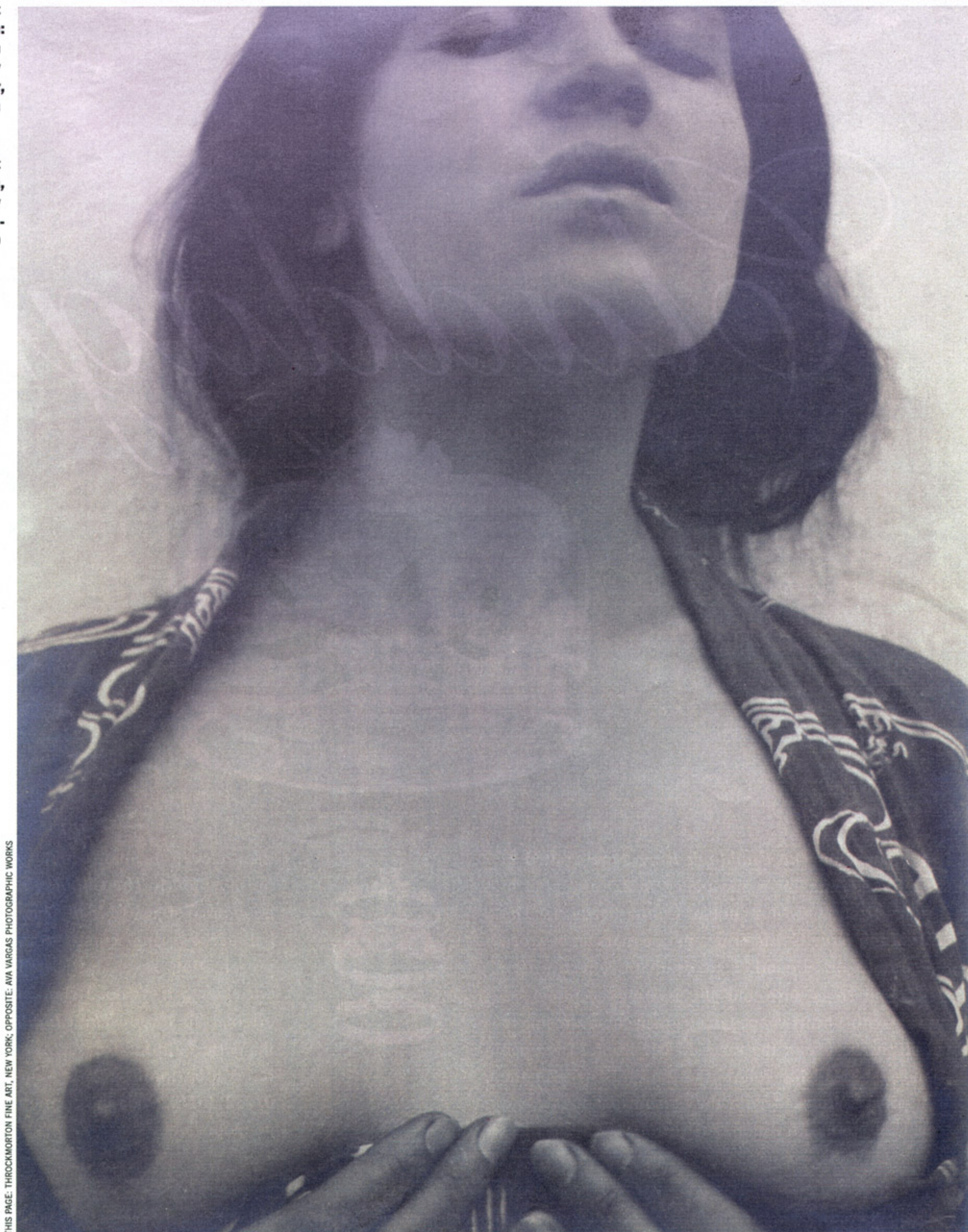


Portrait of the artist
as a young woman:
Tina Modotti, right, in
1924, photographed by
her lover and mentor,
Edward Weston

Roses, 1924 (detail)
A print of Modotti's most
famous photograph,
far right, was sold in New
York in 1991 for a record-
breaking \$165,000



THIS PAGE: THROCKMORTON FINE ART, NEW YORK; OPPOSITE: AVA VARGAS PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS

COMING UP ROSES

Her death certificate said 'housewife', but Tina Modotti was a muse, revolutionary, spy, and a gifted photographer. No wonder Madonna wants to play her. By Christine Toomey



T

he end, when it came, was mundane, although her life was anything but. Speeding before dawn through the potholed streets of Mexico City on January 6, 1942, Tina Modotti struggled for breath before slumping dead on the back seat of a taxi.

An autopsy concluded she had suffered a heart attack; her friends could not help but suspect foul play because nothing about her had ever been straightforward. She was just 45. On her death certificate Modotti was described simply as a "housewife", but this final epithet masked her many other identities as a model and muse, photographer, silent movie star, revolutionary and spy.

It was not until a print of one of her photographs, entitled *Roses*, sold at Sotheby's in New York in 1991 for \$165,000 — a world record at that time for a photographic print — that the art world began to take notice of Modotti's work. Since then Mick Jagger has declared his intention to make a film about her, Madonna collects her, and dreams of portraying her on the screen, while John Galliano cited her as the inspiration for his winter 1998-99 collection for Dior. Some consider these dubious tributes for a woman whose stature as an artist was always overshadowed by her personal slipstream. But it is, at least, recognition on a scale she craved during her lifetime.

It was Modotti's reputation as a femme fatale that both dogged and distressed her most. "Newspapers have followed me with wolf-like greediness... and referred to me as a 'woman of striking beauty'... I could not possibly see what 'prettiness' had to do with the revolutionary movement," she once wrote.

From an early age it was clear that she would never be content with the constraints of her traditional Italian upbringing or to rely on her beauty alone. She was born in Udine, northern Italy, in August 1896. At 17 she emigrated to California to join her father, who had gone there in search of work. She took a job as a seamstress in a San Francisco sweatshop, where her dark looks, sensual eyes, beestung lips and a mass of wavy hair quickly attracted attention and she was occasionally asked to model clothes made in the factory.

Desperate for a life beyond the drudgery of factory work, Modotti tried her hand at amateur dramatics and also took to visiting the opera, museums and art exhibitions. She soon fell in love with Ruby Richey, a young painter and poet who, like Modotti, craved the exotic, styling himself *Roubaix de l'Abrie Richey*. Whether they were ever formally married has never been clear; for Modotti the relationship provided an escape from the confines of the immigrant community



and an introduction to San Francisco's artistic set.

Modotti was 21, and she and Richey quickly developed a reputation for wild all-night parties. Encouraged by her bohemian friends to try her luck in Hollywood, she landed a number of minor silent movie roles, but soon tired of being typecast as the fiery Latin lover "with a knife in her teeth and blood in her eye", as one friend described it.

The turning point in her life came when Edward Weston, the acclaimed American photographer, attended one of the couple's parties in 1920. Weston asked Modotti to model for him the following year, and they began a passionate affair. "Oh! The beauty of it all! Wine, books, pictures, music, candlelight, eyes to look into — and then darkness — and kisses," she wrote to him on January 27, 1922. It was the first of many intimate letters she would send Weston over the next decade.



Character assassination: Modotti's enemies made the most of the Mella murder trial, where she was accused of killing her Cuban lover. By the time she was acquitted, there was little she could do to resurrect her reputation



Wine Glasses, 1925

This still life, also known as *Experiment in Related Form*, shows Modotti's mastery of photographic techniques

Calla Lilies, 1926

Far from being influenced by Weston, Modotti may have inspired him with her close-up shots of nature

1º de mayo (Workers' Parade), c 1926

As her political views developed, so too did her subject matter, below



Some believe that without the nude photographs Weston took of Modotti at this time, she would have remained in obscurity. Others argue that her notoriety as his model and muse only hindered her later attempts to be taken seriously as an artist in her own right. Modotti herself felt nothing but gratitude towards Weston. "Oh Edward dear — I feel so rich so fortunate to have known you in life — to have been near you — to have loved and to love you," she wrote to him four years later. "How often the thought comes to me of all I owe to you for having been the one important being at a certain time of my life when I did not know which way to turn."

After Richey died of smallpox, Weston left his wife to live with Modotti in Mexico. She was firmly cast as a seductress in the public mind; the fact that Weston's wife, by then resigned to her husband's frequent philandering, apparently gave her blessing to the move

and sent one of her sons to live with his father did little to redeem her reputation. When they arrived in Mexico in 1923, she found that Weston's nude images of her outraged the strict Catholic society. Although she was quickly accepted by Mexico's vibrant artistic community, her letters show that she was well aware she was regarded as a "dirty foreigner" by many.

Modotti nonetheless fell in love with the country and was inspired to develop her own artistic career. She struck a deal with Weston that in return for running his studio, she would become his apprentice. After just a few months of observing his techniques, she earned herself a name as a portrait photographer and began to devote more time to her own artistic projects. Although many of her earliest photographs show the powerful influence of Weston's emphasis on pure design and objectivity, her later works of art, from her sensual

flower portraits to striking images of peasant workers and revolutionary symbols, has a warmth and sense of social realism that Weston's lacked.

"Most people assume that Tina's work was heavily influenced by Weston. But I think it was the other way around. Before he met Tina, Weston's work was more formal and pictorial. After she started taking close-up studies of nature he did too. I believe she radically changed the direction of his work," says Spencer Throckmorton, a New York photography dealer who collects the work of both Weston and Modotti.

While Modotti thrived in Mexico, Weston found life there difficult. After 10 years of revolution the country was still wracked by political upheaval and he found the unrest distracting. The early passion of the couple's relationship had given way to infidelities on both sides, and within 18 months of their ➤➤➤

She was imprisoned on the pretext that she had been involved in a plot to kill Mexico's president



THROCKMORTON FINE ART, NEW YORK

How Modotti saw the men in her life: Cuban communist Mella, left, in 1928, and photographer Weston in 1923

arrival Weston then decided to return to California.

Although their relationship eventually settled into a lasting friendship, Weston's departure pained Modotti. "I must tell you that I am lonesome and that I am overwhelmed by tenderness as I think of you," she wrote the day he left. She promised him again and again that she would be a "good girl" and remain faithful to him in his absence.

Out of Weston's shadow, Modotti's art received increasing acclaim. By 1926 her work was being exhibited alongside his and her photographs began to appear in international publications. Despite such success she was plagued by self-doubt and given to dismissing her work as "futile" and "absurd". In one letter to Weston she vented her frustration at being unable to find a buyer for the same *Roses* photograph that eventually broke a world record at Sotheby's. "Of all the old friends and acquaintances not one takes me seriously as a photographer — not one has asked me to show my work." Only her sense of humour saved her from certain despair. "I put too much art in my life — too much energy — and consequently I have not much left to give to art," she once wrote to Weston, but was quick to admit that the dilemma could be viewed as a "tragi-comedy".

Much of the energy she referred to went into affairs with some of Mexico's leading artists, including the muralist Diego Rivera. The public fantasies about her promiscuity were confirmed, and the hostility this engendered towards her came to a head after Modotti, then 32, fell in love with an exiled Cuban communist called Julio Mella. When Mella was shot dead while walking beside her on a Mexico City street late one night in 1929, the Mexican authorities did not hesitate to implicate Modotti in his murder.

At a sensational trial she was condemned as a calculating Mata Hari. Her personal letters, confiscated by the police, were read aloud in court, and newspapers ran lurid stories about "the intimate and sentimental problems of Mrs Modotti". Although she was finally acquitted — the crime was attributed to Cuban right-wingers — the damage to Modotti's reputation was irreparable. She was later imprisoned briefly on the pretext that she had been involved in a communist plot to assassinate Mexico's president, and was expelled from the country in 1930.

"I hope Edward you enjoyed a good laugh when you heard I was accused of participating in the attempt to shoot [President] Ortiz Rubio — who would have thought it, eh? Such a gentle-looking girl and who made

such nice photographs of flowers and babies," Modotti wrote sardonically to Weston as she sat in a detention centre in New Orleans, after being refused entry to the United States because of her communist links.

After six weeks on a rat-infested cargo ship she disembarked in Rotterdam and was guaranteed safe passage to Berlin, at that time still considered a haven for artists and radicals. Her struggle between life and art had begun to overwhelm her. "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," she confessed in one of her last letters to Weston, gathered together by Amy Rule, an archivist at the Center for Creative Photography in Arizona. As Hitler's Nazi movement gained strength she felt she had no choice but to abandon photography and commit herself to the cause of international communism and the fight against fascism.

She left Germany in the autumn of 1930 and travelled to Moscow at the invitation of Vittorio Vidali, an Italian she had met several years before in Mexico and whose political fanaticism fuelled her own growing enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause. He encouraged her to join International Red Aid, an organisation set up to help political prisoners that also acted as a front for the Comintern, one of the principal Soviet organisations involved in foreign intelligence work.

Modotti's first job was as a translator, but her duties soon expanded to include undercover missions in eastern Europe. Although few details of this period of her life exist, records reveal that she was furnished with false passports and bogus identities to work as a secret agent in Poland, Hungary and Romania. Under the guise of smuggling funds for the defence of political prisoners, she worked gathering intelligence.

When Hitler came to power in 1933 Modotti was posted with Vidali to run the Red Aid office in Paris; from there they were sent to Madrid. By this time their once intimate relationship had deteriorated into little more than a political partnership; Vidali co-ordinated military operations against Franco's forces, while she worked in a series of army hospitals, disguised as a Spanish nun. After the fall of Madrid in 1939 Modotti escaped over the Pyrenees to France.

Having been once again refused entry to the United States, she moved with Vidali back to Mexico. Some believe Modotti was so disillusioned by this point — particularly after the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of 1939 — that she had decided, shortly before her death, to resign from the Communist party. The rumours fuelled speculation that Vidali had Modotti poisoned to save the party such an embarrassment.

Hours before she died Modotti and Vidali had been to a dinner party. Vidali excused himself early, leaving her to take a taxi home alone. For years after her death there was further speculation that Vidali might have had Modotti poisoned because she had become a hindrance to his relationship with another woman. But Modotti had a family history of heart disease, and no traces of poison were recorded by the coroner. Some historians believe, however, the technology available to Mexico's medical experts at that time may not have been sophisticated enough to detect certain toxins.

The lingering mystery surrounding her death has added to Modotti's reputation as an unpredictable, flamboyant character, but those who knew her remember her differently. "She was very quiet... contained, almost shy," recalls Mildred Constantine, an American writer and author of a biography on Modotti, who met her in Mexico City the year before she died. And in her epitaph the Nobel prize-winning Chilean poet Pablo Neruda praises Modotti's "gentle nature" and concludes that hers had been a "fragile life". Although a large exhibition of her work was held in

Mexico City shortly after her death, it was not until the Museum of Modern Art in New York staged a retrospective in 1977 that interest in her began to revive. This was followed by a series of exhibitions around the world, including one in Philadelphia in 1995 partly sponsored by Madonna, who is believed to have been an anonymous telephone bidder for the *Roses* photograph, eventually bought by Susie Tompkins, founder of the clothing manufacturers Esprit.

The most Modotti is believed to have been paid for one of her photographs while alive is \$8, but three years after the record-breaking sale of *Roses*, a vintage print of one of her flower portraits, *Calla Lilies*, was sold at Christie's for \$189,000. The sums are partly due to her rarity; Modotti is estimated to have produced little more than 300 images in all. Because she left no will, those photographs of hers not held in museums in America and Mexico have gradually been dispersed over the years among individual collectors, many of them in Japan.

Nearly 100 previously unseen photographs, mostly small snapshots taken by Modotti in Mexico, were recently discovered in an old steamer trunk after Patricia Albers, an art historian and curator, encouraged Richey's relatives to search for any old letters she had written to the family. Albers, who is now writing a book based on the photographs and letters, believes they underline the extent to which Modotti was "constantly rewriting who she was". "She never stood still intellectually," says Albers. "I think this was her great strength. She was always willing to rethink her place in the world."

Despite having worked in the medium for only seven years, Modotti is now considered one of the foremost photographers of her day. "There is always a lot of interest in someone who is not only enormously bright and accomplished but also incredibly sexy," says Virginia Dodier, supervisor of the photography study centre at New York's Museum of Modern Art. It is for this reason that Modotti's friends fear she could become a marketing phenomenon like her contemporary, the Mexican surrealist painter Frida Kahlo. "Frida Kahlo has been turned into an icon, not a woman, and that has led to a cheapening of her personality. I would not like to see Tina Modotti turned into a similar commodity," says Mildred Constantine, who knew both women.

Concerned about the way Modotti was being portrayed in Mick Jagger's proposed film, Margaret Hooks, the Irish journalist on whose award-winning biography the project was based, has refused to renew his film rights; however, director Stephen Herek's *Mud Pony Productions* is now developing a script.

Spencer Throckmorton believes it is Modotti's courage that makes her such a seductive figure. "She lived life on the cutting edge, on the crest of events of her day both in art and politics, and that sort of creative and daring spirit is very appealing."

In her home town of Udine such daring is still regarded with suspicion. A proposal to name a new theatre after her was quashed recently by officials who felt she was too controversial. "She was unconventional and free," says Ricardo Toffoletti, head of the Tina Modotti committee, set up by admirers. "She was photographed naked, she joined the Communist party and as a woman she did not follow the rules."

The struggle Modotti faced in balancing her work and her relationships, Hooks believes, strikes a chord with many women. "Even though in the end she gave up her great love of photography for a political ideal that became really ugly, she remains a sympathetic character because we understand some of her doubts and choices and also her mistakes."

Modotti's appeal today also lies in the way she let her life to be motivated by passionate commitment, personal instinct and love. Her photographs are a moving testimony to this ■