

Imogen Cunningham and Tina Modotti

Two Lives, Two Worlds, Two Visions

Colby Jordan

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Imogen Cunningham and Tina Modotti were contemporaries separated in age by only thirteen years. Despite this closeness chronologically, their very different backgrounds separated them by a larger gap culturally and artistically.

Tina Modotti's photographic career spanned a short seven years from 1923 to 1930, almost all of it in Mexico. Imogen Cunningham's career was about 10 times as long at about seventy years from about 1906 through 1976. Each of them was influenced uniquely by their surroundings of family, friends, and place. Despite these cultural differences, similarities are evident in their photographs especially in the mid 1920s. Perhaps this was because, for a short time, the varying influences on their lives narrowed and despite their many differences they separately followed similar paths.

Short biographies of each photographer, noting highlights of their early years, are important to an understanding of their influences and motivations and help to better understand their photography.

Imogen Cunningham was born in 1883 in Portland, Oregon. She attended the university of Washington in Seattle in 1903. She bought her first camera, a 4x5, in about 1905. She concentrated on chemistry and wrote a thesis titled "*Modern Processes of Photography.*"

After college she was employed by the Edward Curtis Studio in Seattle. In 1909, awarded a fellowship to study abroad, she traveled to Dresden, Germany to attend the Technische Hochschule and study in the photochemistry department. In 1910 she wrote a thesis "*About Self Production of Platinum Papers for Brown Tones.*"

On her way home from Dresden she visited Paris, met Alvin Langdon Coburn in London and Alfred Stieglitz and Gertrude Käsebier in New York. Back in Seattle she established a portrait studio.

Imogen was strongly influenced by the Photo-Secessionists, involved with the artists and photographers in the Bay area, was a member of Group f.64, and continued as a very active, well known and respected photographer until her death in 1976.

Tina Modotti was born in 1896 in Udine, Italy. She quit school at 13 and in 1913 she immigrated to the United States and came to San Francisco when she was 16

years old. In San Francisco she worked as a seamstress and became involved in community theater. By 1919 she had parts in Hollywood silent films. It was during this time that she, through her husband, met and began to be involved in the Los Angeles art community. Through this involvement she met Edward Weston with whom a few years later in 1923 she moved to Mexico City.

Modotti, along with Weston became part of the Mexico arts community. She managed Weston's studio, quickly learned photographic technique from Weston and continued as a working photographer after Weston returned to the United States in 1926. Her photographs were produced with a 4x5 view camera early in her career, and later a 3x4 Graflex.

The photographs each produced were obviously an outgrowth of their respective environments and the influences of the people surrounding them. We see this in Tina Modotti's progression from architectural and plant studies, striking portraits, documentation of Diego Rivera's murals, hammer and sickle motifs, and finally sensitive and strongly symbolic marionette photos.

In the development of Imogen Cunningham's photographic vision we see a progression from her very early allegorical images, on to flora, body parts-hands, feet, even ears, "stolen pictures", continued experimentation, and a sense of humor throughout her career.

Both Modotti and Cunningham used portrait photography as a mainstay to pay the bills and allow them to photograph other subjects. In addition to portraits Tina also earned a living photographing and documenting Mexican architecture and murals.

My first exposure to Modotti, was in Houston Texas in December 1995 while an exhibition of Tina Modotti's work organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art was traveling to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. I am amazed at what Modotti produced in her short photographic career. In that short time her images covered a wide variety of subjects, photographed in a variety of styles. I sense a passion for her art in most of them. Her early photos show the influence of Edward Weston, but it is obvious that she was a very fast learner and took off with her own vision.

Her flora and architectural photos are beautifully done abstractions of reality. She did striking portraits in the mid-20s, the best of which were non-traditional, low angle viewpoints. Her growing association and fascination with the communist party can be seen in her studies of hammers and sickles, corn and bandoliers around 1927. From 1927 through 1929 she seemed to spend a great deal of time on social commentary focusing on hands, people at work, people reading *El Machete* as the party took over more of her life. In 1929 her marionette photos took the place of the subjects before and carried the same messages in new

forms. Through all of these, Modotti was able to let her feelings and vision show through.

My first memorable views of Imogen Cunningham's work was through several books of her work at local libraries. These piqued my interest and I have since acquired *Imogen Cunningham Flora* by Richard Lorenz. This book contains a selection of Cunningham's botanical images spanning much of her career but focusing primarily on the 1920's and 1930's. I recently had an opportunity to see several original Cunningham prints, what a treat!

In her photographs of flowers, succulents, and other plants I see some work that matches what I enjoy shooting which makes me appreciate all the more what she was doing seventy years ago. I can see through her photographs that she had an feel and affection for her subjects.

As with Tina Modotti, you can see movement and growth as a photographer with a changing vision. Imogen Cunningham had the advantage of more years to develop her craft and her vision and, I think that she also had the benefit of better quality equipment and stronger technical skills to bring her vision to final form.

Flora, especially succulents were a strong recurring theme for Imogen especially in the 20s and 30s. However, natural themes recur over and over in her work for her entire life. Late in life in a photograph of Morris Graves taken in 1975 she combined some of her best portrait skills with plant forms to produce one of her best images. She was thoroughly attracted to double exposures and variations on double exposures through her career. (Though her biographer states that she did little double exposure experimentation between about 1935 and 1960. Funny, in the same book I find examples of double exposures dated in 1955.) I find the experimentation with double exposures amusing in light of her being a part of the Group f.64 with their goal of producing "pure and unmanipulated photographs."

Over and over again in biographies and in photographs I find references to and examples of Imogen Cunningham's wit. Not only was she an exceptional photographer with a astonishing vision, she was able to poke fun at herself and others. I don't know if the others were able to enjoy these, but I can picture Imogen with an impish grin as she zinged Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. She seemed derive a lot of pleasure from poking at photographers who may have taken themselves a bit too seriously, and Weston and Adams certainly did. As an example, she sent Edward Weston a photograph she took of an outhouse and referred to a photograph Weston took in Mexico; "When I saw this on my wanderings this summer, my thoughts flew to you. I realize that it does not have the classic beauty of the 'Greek Urn' of the Mexico City days, but there is something about it which compensates anyway. Perhaps it is the fact that it is so sociable and friendly." I would like to have know this woman.

Relationships with men made major differences in the lives and photography of both Tina Modotti and Imogen Cunningham. As I read about Tina Modotti I had a strong sense of her life changing as her relationships with men ebbed and flowed. Certainly her relationship with Weston resulted in her learning photography, her relationships with men involved in the communist party in Mexico shaped her life after Weston left, and by the time she left Mexico in 1930 her life was ruled by Vittorio Vidali and perhaps was one of the reasons she abandoned photography. Even though Tina is considered by some as an example of an independent, early feminist, she allowed significant male control of her life.

Imogen Cunningham was positively influenced by her father to be independent, inquisitive, and to pursue a college education. Roi Partridge, her husband, was both a strong positive influence and a negative influence on Imogen. After their divorce in 1934 however, Imogen was her own woman. Quite the opposite of Tina Modotti, I sense independence in Imogen through most of her life and career. This independence was displayed in her photography in a number of ways. Most importantly, I think her independence freed her to experiment and continually grow artistically.

Two Visions

Tina Modotti, *Roses*, 1924.

In 1991 Tina Modotti's photograph *Roses*, made in 1924 sold at auction for a record of \$167,000. This was probably a turning point to bring about an awareness of Tina Modotti as a photographer and not simply as one of Edward Weston's mistresses and models.

This photograph taken early in her short career is an almost square composition of roses laying on their sides, partially crushed. Though the tones in the photograph range from featureless white through featureless black, it is low contrast and soft but also very luminous, they almost seem to glow. The four roses visible in the composition hold a viewer with the flowing form of their petals, sweeping in spirals within the frame. Sarah Lowe, in her usual overly dramatic style says *Roses* is a “..momento mori—the fading flowers symbolizing mortality—and a time honored message of love.” For me this is a beautifully made, beautifully lit photograph easy to look at over and over again.

Imogen Cunningham, *Callas*, about 1925

This photograph of Callas, one of many calla photographs by Imogen Cunningham has much the same feel and Tina Modotti's *Roses*. In a vertical format we see 9 calla blossoms, repeating oval shapes punctuated with stigmas providing lines out of the circular shapes form by the flowers. The range of tones

is similarly broad as in *Roses*, and though there is not as much luminosity as Modotti's, the calls at the top of the photograph do seem to glow. It is almost as if each of these photographers had been given the same assignment but chose to use different flower subjects.

Tina Modotti, *Calla Lilies*, 1924.

A familiar Modotti image, and serving as the front jacket photograph of Sarah Lowe's *Tina Modotti: Photographs* *Calla Lilies* escapes being a straight representation of two flowers. This is a strongly graphic image that uses two dark flower stems to forcefully guide the viewer's attention from the bottom to the top of the photograph and force attention to the forms of the flower heads. But it does not matter if the lines are stems or if there are flowers at the top, only the form and the tones are important. This image is such a signature of Modotti that it was used in an Italian comic about Tina Modotti and Edward Weston.

Imogen Cunningham, *Two Callas*, about 1925.

At about the same time Tina Modotti was photographing callas in Mexico Imogen Cunningham was bringing callas and other plants into her studio. Imogen's *Two Callas* is the same subject as Tina's *Calla Lilies* though with an entirely different feel. Imogen chose to view these callas from the top looking down. We see two calla flower heads, one bright and one subdued and gray. The flowing white spirals of the flower are matched by similar shapes in the leaves of the callas. Where the flowers are white, the leaves are dark. This is at once a realistic expression of the flower, a botanical study, and at the same time a composition in dark and light tones, strong contrasts, and flowing forms. It is finely detailed and sharp where Tina's *Calla Lilies* is bold and soft.

At the same time Tina Modotti and Imogen Cunningham were photographing plants and flowers, others were doing the same thing. John Hagemeyer, a friend of Imogen's, photographed roses, tulips, calla lilies, and magnolias similarly. Margrethe Mather, a photographic partner of Edward Weston prior to Tina, photographed some striking botanical studies, including callas.

Imogen's signature flower photographs are of magnolias. She photographed them extensively from about 1923 through 1925. Two of the most recognized are:

Imogen Cunningham, *Magnolia Blossom*, 1925.

and

Imogen Cunningham, *Magnolia Blossom, Tower of Jewels, 1925.*

Both of these are exceptional photographs for their composition, tonal range, the depth of field, and the details of the flowers. I see both of these are primarily flower studies but again, as with her *Two Callas*, the actual subject can be put in the background while the viewer concentrates on the design and the form. These are photographs to get lost in.

With even this small selection of flora photographs from these photographers you can see a major difference styles. Imogen's style is more precise as seen in sharper focus, more depth of field, much more refined prints. Tina's seem more rustic, perhaps more "painterly" than Imogen's more precise representations.

Tina Modotti, *Stadium, Mexico City, 1927.*

and

Imogen Cunningham, *Mills College Amphitheater, about 1920.*

These two photographers are so similar that would think the two photographers were on the same assignment or that Tina was attempting to copy Imogen's photograph. Both of them are extremely strong, graphic images of stone seating in amphitheaters. Imogen's accentuates the curves of the seats and directs the eye of the viewer down to the right side of the photographs with a combination of the v-shaped element of the seating bordered by the steps, alternating highlight and shadows, and the solid black of the wall. Tina's composition pulls the viewer directly into the photograph with the alternating tones of highlights and shadows and the straight lines of the seating gradually moving the eyes to the left.

Imogen came back to this type of intense graphic image in the late 20's, seen in photographs such as her *Leaf Patterns* and her industrial photography. Tina's experimentation with strong graphics are seen in her mid to late 20s *Telephone Wires, Mexico* and *Sugar Cane*.

Tina Modotti, *Maria Marin de Orozco, 1925.*

The posing, lighting, and camera angle of this photograph are typical of most of the best of Tina Modotti's portrait photography. Tina poses her subjects fairly close to the background, more than likely standing and occasionally leaning against the wall, lighting is primarily from the side and I suspect it was generally only natural light. The camera angle is low, looking up at the subject. Of the photographs I have seen she seems to split between having the subjects look out of the frame and having the subjects look at the camera lens. Generally the images are softly focused and with low contrast. In person these are beautiful prints. The reproductions in *Tina Modotti: Photographs* do not do them justice. (It

occurs to me that some photographs reproduce well in print and some do not. My guess is that the sharper, more contrasty photos do better in print.)

Imogen Cunningham, *Joseph Sheridan, Painter*, 1931.

and

Imogen Cunningham, *Martha Graham 2*, 1931.

Oh what to pick as an example of Imogen Cunningham's portraiture! Her long career provided Imogen with years to perfect her portrait skills and to photographs quite a broad range of people. Everyone is a favorite! I chose to concentrate on these two because they are both double exposures. The first *Joseph Sheridan, Painter* was more than likely done in camera during this sitting. It is an expressive portrait, capturing something of the man and not just a straight representational portrait. In this case the use of the double exposure was to tell the viewer a bit more about the subject. I see him sitting up almost straight then dropping down and putting his head on his hand. Could he have been tiring of the sitting? I do feel this was an "instantaneous" double exposure, almost an accident, and surely not as planned as *Martha Graham 2* and *Susan Elizabeth Cunningham*. Typical of Imogen, it is technically perfectly exposed and printed, sharp, crisp, a full range of tones.

The same applies to *Martha Graham 2*. There are a number of exceptional Martha Graham photographs by Cunningham, and according to *Imogen Cunningham Ideas Without End* they were all done in one afternoon session in 1931 and were the first of Imogen's photographs to appear in *Vanity Fair*. I find the *Martha Graham 2* double exposure fascinating because each of the images in the print could stand alone, and they work well together. Martha Graham's left arm forms a frame for the entire photograph and for the smaller image within the larger.

Imogen Cunningham, *Under the Queensboro Bridge*, 1934.

New York in 1934 saw Imogen discover "stolen pictures" - her description of street photography. These were photographs that she took during a visit to New York in 1934. (Interestingly, while there she photographed Alfred Stieglitz with his camera. She had apparently gained his attention and respect since her first visit to his gallery 24 years earlier in 1910!) Imogen's "stolen pictures" became an on again off again theme from this start in the mid 1930s. These photographs led Imogen to attempt social documentary photography in the style of Dorothea Lange, a friend of Imogen's. I believe she was too mirthful to follow Lange's lead. Tina Modotti on the other hand seemed to thrive on the social commentary/documentary photograph.

Tina Modotti, *Elegance and Poverty*, 1928.

Heavy handed as it is, Tina accomplished what she intended in this photograph. It is absolutely not a straight documentary image, but a manipulated, editorial photomontage placing a dejected, weary worker in front of a billboard advertising fine men's clothing. I doubt if Imogen could have put something like this together. Imogen's treatment of social concerns was very human and caring. Though Tina did care about her subjects, she I believe that more often than not she photographed them for a purpose, and in so doing continued to exploit them.

Tina Modotti, *Women of Tehuantepec*, 1929.

and

Tina Modotti, *Woman of Tehuantepec*, 1929.

Tina also did straight social documentary as seen in her Tehuantepec photographs. Many of these were neither manipulative nor condemning, simple photographs of people stopped in the course of their daily routine. I wonder if these people did not remind her of her childhood in Italy. Though not technically striking photographs they are appealing in their simplicity.

Tina Modotti, *Hands of the Puppeteer*, 1929.

Tina made several photographs along this same theme. They were done quite late in her photographic career. At the time she was still heavily immersed in the communist party and I believe these images were to some extent a final effort on her part to express herself artistically. She had gone through the phase of the bandoliers and hammers and sickles. She had put in her time documenting workers and peasants. She had been called upon by the party to provide free portraits and other photographs. She was ready for something more.

The marionette photographs, and especially *Hands of the Puppeteer* are a return to sensitivity (though a few of this series is still rather severe, anti-establishment.) The arrangement of the hands in this photograph, the shadows falling on the stucco wall behind, the strings of the puppet falling across the lower hand all combined to make a visually stunning image.

Tina's photographic record ends shortly after her marionette photos. There are a few photos in the Philadelphia exhibition taken in Germany in 1930, but there it ends. Tina returned to Mexico in about 1942 and died there.

Imogen Cunningham, *Self Portrait Mendocino*, 1965.

At the time Tina was abandoning photography, Imogen Cunningham was just getting started and continued until just a couple of weeks before her death in

1976. This is a classic Imogen image. She has captured her shadow, hunched over her camera, against the side of a weathered building. The shadow of the car and man are more than likely those of her son Gryff. There is a similar photograph she did on the street in San Francisco in 1973, *My Label*. Imogen was toying with us and at the same time making a statement about life.

One of Imogen's last projects was a book titled "*After Ninety*." It was not completed until after her death but it was a fitting end to her life and career. She was a photographer over ninety years old photographing lovingly photographing others over ninety.

Here is a quote out of *Imogen Cunningham Ideas without End* that is a fitting end to the discussion of Imogen. Referring to a possible caption for a self portrait of Imogen that was not included in *After Ninety*, "She's made her living all her life by photography. She liked to quote *Confucius*. She told me, 'Photography is as wonderful to me today as it would be if I had never before seen a photograph. Let's keep it so'"

Addendum 1

From *On Photography* by Tina Modotti *Mexican Folkways, Vol. 5 No.4, October-December 1929*

Always, when the words "art" and "artistic" are applied to my photographic work, I am disagreeably affected. This is due, surely, to the bad use and abuse made of these terms.

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.

Whether or not photography may or may not be a work of art comparable to other plastic creation has been much discussed in recent years. Naturally, opinions differ. There are those who do accept photography as a medium of expression on a par with any other and there are others who continue to look myopically at the twentieth century with eighteenth century eyes, incapable of accepting the manifestations of our mechanical civilization. But, for us who use the camera as a tool just as the painter does his brushes, adverse opinions do not matter. We have the approbation of those who recognize the merits of photography in its multiple aspects and accept it as the most eloquent, the most direct means for fixing, for registering the present epoch.

To know whether photography is or is not an art matters little. What is important is to distinguish between good and bad photography. By good is meant that photography which accepts all the limitations inherent in photographic technique and takes advantage of the possibilities and characteristics the medium offers. By bad photography is mean that which is done, one may say, with a kind of inferiority complex, with no appreciation of what photography itself offers: but on the contrary, recurring to all sorts of imitations.

Such work gives the impression that the photographer is almost ashamed of making photographs and tries to hide what there is of photography in his work, superimposing effects and falsifications that can only please those of perverted taste.

Photography, precisely because it can only be produced in the present and because it is based on what exists objectively before the camera, takes its place as the most satisfactory medium for registering objective life in all its aspects, and from this comes its documental value. If to this is added sensibility and understanding and, above all, a clear orientation as to the place it should have in

the field of historical development, I believe that the result is something worthy of a place in social production, to which we should all contribute.

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