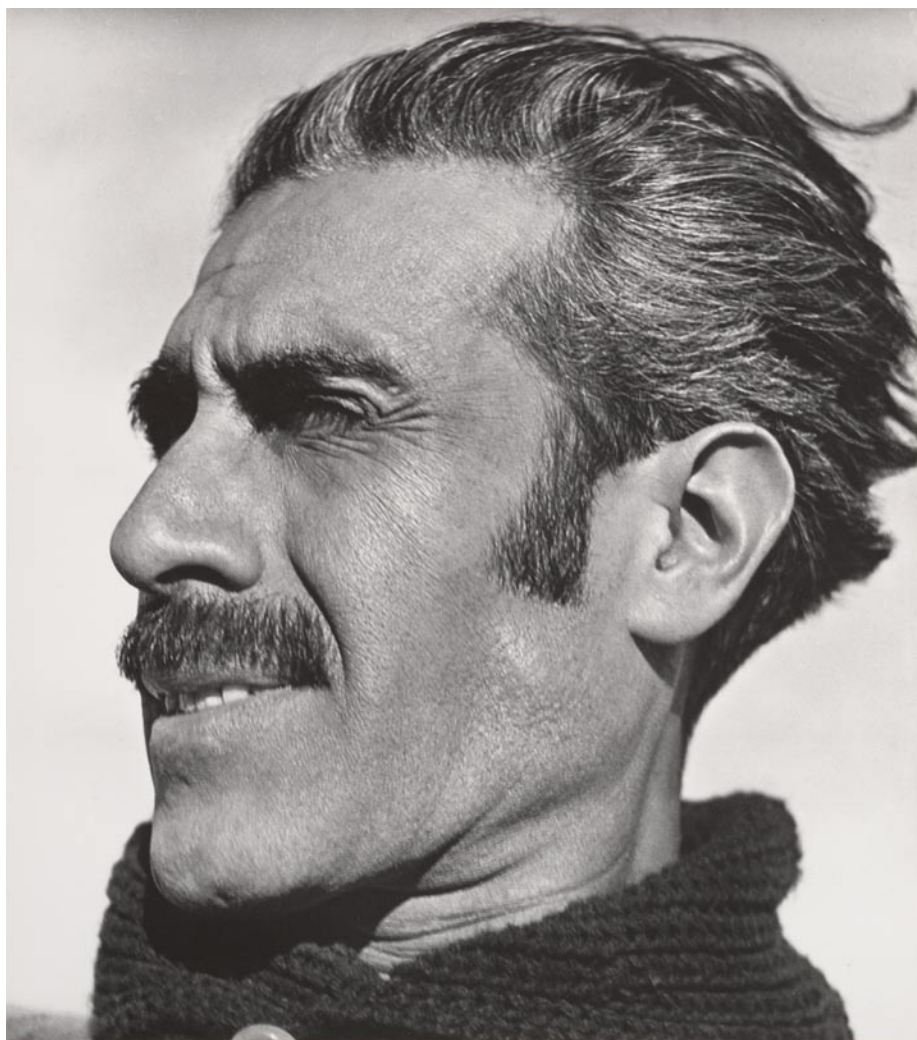


EDWARD WESTON MEXICO



August 9–November 16, 2008



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Doris and John Norton Gallery for the Center for Creative Photography, Phoenix Art Museum

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Among the twentieth century's most influential art photographers, Edward Weston (1886–1958) is widely respected for his many contributions to the field. Along with Ansel Adams, Weston pioneered a modernist style characterized by the use of a large camera to create sharply focused and richly detailed black-and-white photographs. Like many photographers, Weston engaged in commercial practice to support himself, but his dedication to the ideals of art differentiated him from his peers. Over a three-year period—from July 1923 to December 1924 and from August 1925 to November 1926—he lived and worked in Mexico, creating powerful photographs featuring aspects of the local culture and scenery. Not only did Mexico infuse Weston's work with new subject matter, but the fresh environment allowed him to develop artistic themes that would be central to his career.

Traveling with his lover, Tina Modotti, greatly enriched Weston's experience. Modotti acted as his photographic apprentice and assistant, and her knowledge of the Spanish language and the local artistic community allowed Weston greater access to the lively cultural scene.

The photographs presented in *Edward Weston: Mexico* suggest his developing modernist vision and his well-established concern for creating exquisitely beautiful prints. Weston's reactions to Mexico—recorded in letters, journal entries, and snapshots—shine light on his emotional, exciting, and trying experiences.

A RICH RESOURCE AND A RECEPTIVE CULTURE

Following the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), which replaced a thirty-year dictatorship with a constitutional republic, the country's artistic and cultural scene flourished. During this period, known as the Mexican Renaissance, the government promoted native artists like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros by commissioning murals about the country's history. The aim—to enrich and educate illiterate countrymen—was soon taken up by many expatriate writers and artists who were drawn to Mexico City in the 1920s. The *Mexicanidad* movement encouraged the artists of the Mexican Renaissance to realign themselves with Mexican popular art and ancient and indigenous expression. This move away from academic and European influences fostered a rich environment for innovative art production.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Edward Weston met a couple who had recently joined the bohemian artists' circle to which he belonged. Around 1921, Weston was introduced to Roubaix de l'Abrie Richey (known as Robo) an American poet and artist, and his wife, Italian-born actress Tina Modotti. Modotti and Weston, immediately attracted to one another, began a secret love affair. In December of that year, Robo Richey was invited to Mexico by the head of the Ministry of Education's Fine Arts Department, Ricardo Gómez Robelo, with the offer of a job, a studio, and exhibition opportunities. Deeply impressed by the culture and landscape he encountered there, Richey wrote to Weston, encouraging him to travel to this picturesque region, describing streets "filled with a golden dust," "heavy-lidded señoritas," and the "volcano pouring forth clouds of smoke."

Robo brought with him a portfolio of his friends' artwork, intending to arrange a group exhibition, but by early February 1922, he had contracted smallpox. When a telegram arrived describing his condition, Tina Modotti left California to be with him; within days of her arrival, he died. She stayed on, grieving for Robo. Looking to the future, she arranged for an exhibition at the National Academy of Fine Arts, which opened in mid-March and included Weston's photographs. Full of enthusiasm, Weston reported to his friend and fellow photographer, Johan Hagemeyer: "Tina wrote me the exhibit a great success in Mexico—'already many of your prints have been sold' ... I think I have sold two prints in the many years I've exhibited in U.S."

In the fall of 1922, Weston traveled to New York, where he met leading east coast photographers Paul Strand and Alfred Stieglitz. Invigorated by Stieglitz's encouragement, and exposure to modern art and photography, Weston began to feel restless and dissatisfied with his life as a portrait photographer and husband. Soon he had separated from his wife, moved out of his home, and was making plans for a sojourn in Mexico with Modotti, who had returned to California. After several delays, on July 30, 1929, Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, and his eldest son Chandler, then thirteen, boarded the S.S. *Colima* bound for Mexico. It was a difficult goodbye, with Weston's younger sons waving farewell and his wife, Flora, calling out, "Tina, take good care of my boys."

COVER

Tina, Mexico, 1923.

Edward Weston Archive. 81.252.87.

LEFT

Manuel Hernández Galván, Shooting, 1924.

From the Judy and Sidney Zuber Collection of
Latin American Photography.

RIGHT

Chandler Weston. *Edward Weston and Tina Modotti
on Board S.S. Colima*, 1923.

Gift of Neil and Jean Weston. 95.30.1.





AN ARTISTIC TRANSFORMATION

In his early career Weston practiced a widely popular photographic style called Pictorialism, adopting a painterly approach to subject matter and print appearance. In his Pictorialist phase, Weston's primary subjects were nudes and portraits. He often printed these negatives on platinum paper to heighten their hazy, soft-focus quality. Beginning in 1922, however, he began to experiment with a new, modernist aesthetic. The subtle tonal graduations, soft lighting, and evocative aspects of his past portraits gave way to bold compositions featuring a wealth of detail and texture. While in Mexico, Weston created new types of pictures, often abstracting the subject, emphasizing the shapes created by the positive and negative spaces, and accentuating dramatic contrasts between dark and light areas.

Weston also seems to have been inspired by the change of scenery to broaden his range of motifs. Just a week into his journey, he wrote of photographing a subject new to him: "A quite marvelous cloud form tempted me—a sunlit cloud which rose from the bay to become a towering white column." Clouds, whether part of a landscape view or seen in isolation, persisted as a theme throughout Weston's time in Mexico. Remarkably Weston had never investigated two common photographic genres—still life and landscape—but they became mainstays of his new work. Arranging Mexican crafts, particularly handmade *juguets* [toys], to form still lifes, he undertook an intensive exploration of texture and form. These experiments culminated in the works for which Weston is best known: the nautilus shells, bell peppers, and other natural objects seen in monumental isolation.



Cloud Study, Mexico, 1924. 81.207.15.

Juguets, Doll and Sombrero, 1926.
Edward Weston Archive. 81.151.11.

Juguets, Penguin, 1926.
Edward Weston Archive. 81.151.16.

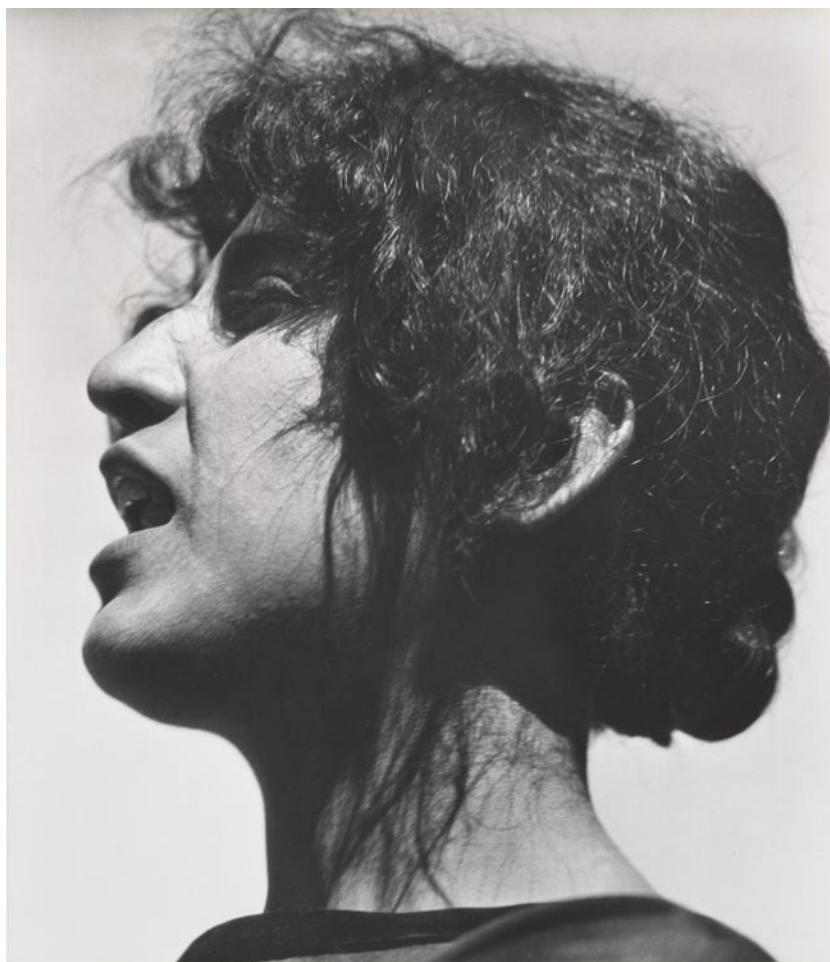




A REWARDING PARTNERSHIP AND A PASSIONATE AFFAIR

Though they came to Mexico as lovers, Weston and Modotti intended to extend their relationship into the professional realm. Modotti had expressed interest in learning photography, hoping it would provide a more reliable source of income than acting. In exchange for Weston's instruction, Modotti would help run the household and studio. She proved a quick learner, and during the eight-month period in 1925 when Weston returned to California, she independently operated their portrait studio. Though her career as a photographer was short—after her deportation from Mexico in 1930 she made few images—she rapidly developed her own style. Modotti's works blend Weston's formal concerns and emphasis on pristine print quality with her own social and political interests. The muralist Siqueiros described her production as "the first revolutionary photographic [work] in Mexico."

Beyond her function as apprentice, however, Modotti played a crucial—and far from passive—role as muse. Weston had a series of relationships with women, each of whom provided meaningful impetus and inspiration. Margarethe Mather, Tina Modotti, Sonya Noskowiak, and Charis Wilson could all be accurately described as muses for Weston, and all participated in Weston's career in constructive, consequential ways. Nancy Newhall, the editor of Weston's published *Daybooks*, wrote of these relationships, "When change came to Weston, it nearly always took the shape of a woman."



Like other Weston muses, Modotti frequently served as his model, and *Edward Weston: Mexico* features both nude studies and a pair of tiny prints of her expressive face. Modotti also advanced Weston's career in Mexico City by introducing him to the city's artists and intellectuals. The couple made day trips and shared evenings with expatriates Rafael Sala, a painter, and his wife Monna Alfau, from Spain and the French artist Jean Charlot. They came to know Mexican luminaries General Manuel Hernández Galván; Diego Rivera and his wife Guadalupe (above); and the painter, art historian, and volcanologist Dr. Atl and his lover, poet and painter Nahui Olin. Modotti helped arrange for displays of Weston's photography, including a 1925 joint exhibition of their work at the State Museum in Guadalajara.

In mid-April 1926, the author Anita Brenner approached Weston about creating photographs for a book project. She was writing a chronicle of Mexican history and culture and hoped Weston would photograph paintings, folk objects, murals, and architecture to illustrate her volume. With Brenner's guidance, and Modotti's assistance in gaining access to objects in private and church collections, Weston made 400 negatives in fulfillment of his contract. When the book *Idols behind Altars* was published in 1929, Brenner credited Modotti and Weston for the illustrations.

By Weston's last year in Mexico, the couple's romance had fizzled, nearly as quickly and completely as it had begun. Modotti's influence on Weston, however, was rich and profoundly connected to Mexico. His last diary entry about the period describes a wrenching departure, "The leaving of Mexico will be remembered for the leaving of Tina. The barrier between us was for the moment broken. Not till we were on the Paseo in a taxi rushing for the train did I allow myself to see her eyes. But when I did and saw what they had to say, I took her to me—our lips met in an endless kiss, only stopped by a gendarme's whistle....*Vámanos!* Last embraces all around—Tina with tear filled eyes. This time, Mexico, it must be adios forever. And you, Tina? I feel it must be farewell forever too."

ARTBREAK GALLERY TALK

Edward Weston in Mexico

Tuesday, September 2, 7 p.m.

Norton Family Assistant Curator of Photography Rebecca Senf gives an overview of Edward Weston's Mexican sojourn from 1923 to 1926.

Presented in partnership with the Museum's Latin American Art Alliance.

OBJECT OF THE MONTH

Doña Maria Moreno y Buenaventura

Tuesdays: August 5, 12, 19, and 26, 11:30 a.m.

Why did fashionable ladies intentionally stain their faces, and why were some artists forbidden to sign their works? Docent Lois Alberts answers these questions and more in her discussion of this Spanish Colonial work.

BOOK COVERS BOOK CLUB

Chile con Karno

Tuesday, August 19, 10:30 a.m.

In support of the Museum's Latin-American collection, and with the assistance of Howard Karno Books, Inc., the Art Research Library has been collecting new, rare, and out-of-print books from Mexico, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, the Hispanic United States, and the Iberian Peninsula for more than twenty-five years. Join special guest Dr. Beverly Adams to discuss a hand-picked selection of some of these fascinating titles.

MOVIES AT THE MUSEUM

Tina in Mexico

Sunday, October 5, 1 p.m.

This film follows the tumultuous and epic story of Tina Modotti: a revolutionary, bohemian spirit, renowned photographer, and intimate companion of Edward Weston. It weaves archival footage, photographs, the murals of Diego Rivera, and lyrical reenactments to conjure the political, artistic, and intimate spaces of their lives in Mexico during the 1920s.

Presented in partnership with the Museum's Latin American Art Alliance.

WORKSHOPS

ASU Lifelong Learning: Art Inspiring Art

Thursdays: October 9 and 23, November 6 and 20, and December 4, 1–3 p.m.

This five-session workshop considers the effect of art on artists. Participants explore ekphrasis, an ancient device of creating new works of art—fine, decorative, or performed—based on others. Participants will visit two special exhibitions, *Edward Weston: Mexico* and Elihu Vedder's *Drawings for the Rubáiyát*, and learn more about a special musical collaboration held at the Museum each year. Finally, participants create their own written works inspired by the masters.

MORE INFORMATION

For information on these programs, please visit phxart.org.

A LANDMARK PHOTOGRAPHY PARTNERSHIP

In 2006, Phoenix Art Museum and the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in Tucson inaugurated a highly innovative and unprecedented collaboration to bring the finest in photography to Phoenix Art Museum visitors. It established a vibrant new photography exhibition program at the Museum, while bringing the Center's world-renowned collections to new and larger audiences.

The Center for Creative Photography is one of the world's largest repositories of materials chronicling photography. Founded in 1975, it now houses 3.8 million archival items and 80,000 fine prints by photographers including Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, Frederick Sommer, W. Eugene Smith, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, and Garry Winogrand.

One of the nation's leading art museums, Phoenix Art Museum presents international exhibitions of the world's greatest art and features a collection that spans the centuries and the globe—American, Asian, contemporary, European, Latin American, and Western American art, and fashion design. Not to be missed are the Thorne Miniature Rooms, the interactive family gallery PhxArtKids, great shopping and dining, and a variety of public events.

Now, through the combined efforts of these two organizations, Phoenix Art Museum visitors will experience unparalleled excellence in the field of photography in the Museum's Doris and John Norton Gallery for the Center for Creative Photography.

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Phoenix Art Museum

CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

Major support for this exhibition is provided by Robin and Ric Donnelley, Joanie and Rick Fox, and Alliance Bank of Arizona.

Additional support is provided by Steve Woods Printing Company.

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