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Department of History and Humanities

Bachelor of Arts in Humanistic Studies

Edward Weston Nude Portraits in Mexico

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Abstract

Edward Weston, one of the most profound modernist photographers of the 20th century, is celebrated for his abstract compositions. While the public's perception of Weston has become synonymous with natural phenomena, for most of his career, Weston devotes himself to figurative exploration. This thesis asks: is it possible to trace and reassess Weston's nude studies through contemporary art historical parameters? Chapter one is a literature review outlining the issues from various scholars' assessment of Weston's approach to capturing the female nude, which focuses mainly on the photographer's work after 1927. Unfortunately, these studies fail to recognize the significance of the photographer's work in Mexico between 1923 and 1926, which contain different avenues of exploration. This thesis aims to uncover how the photographer's approach relates to other profound modernists by building off existing formal parameters from construction and drawing. The following two chapters will review Weston's primary artistic references throughout his Mexican period and how they contribute to the photographer's compositional structure. The final chapter assesses how Weston's aesthetic changes after exposure to Diego Rivera and other Mexican Muralists.

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List of Abbreviations

DB	<i>The Daybooks of Edward Weston</i>
SEP	Ministry of Public Education

1. Introduction

This thesis explores the stylistic development of Edward Weston from 1923 to 1926. By following Weston's primary artistic references during that time, one can see the radical actions that the photographer procured through his representations of the female nude. This paper will also explore the role of the muse and how these individuals can signal shifts in artistic expression and thematic explorations.

Weston's muse for most of his years in Mexico is Tina Modotti. In 1913, Modotti left Italy and came to the United States. She was the principal model for Weston's nude figurative studies from 1922 to 1926. Modotti pushed Weston to move to Mexico in 1923, where he would create many of the most monumental portraits and figurative works of his career.

His prints from the Mexican Period evidence Weston's grasp of contemporary artistic developments in Modern art. Weston's unconventional adaptation and sophisticated implementation of creative techniques from multiple mediums convey an advanced understanding of artistic principles. Rather than introducing additional artistic references, chapters two through four will elaborate on relationships previously mentioned but not analyzed by Weston scholars. As stated in Chapter 1, these correlations can be seen through in-depth visual analyses of the Tina Modotti series and using comparative graphic material by modernist artists that Weston was familiar with and looked at very closely. Weston's home studio in Mexico helps guide our

discussion of Weston's primary artistic references as he entered his Mexican Period. On September 1st Weston describes his recently finished minimalist studio with, "Walls light grey, doors and windows in their original green-blue, floor darker grey, on the walls a few prints- Hokusai-Picasso- and one of my own photographs-the 'Smoke-Stacks' of course"¹ Leslie Furth provides us with a brief explanation regarding the seemingly odd combination of images by, "ranging in media, production dates, and region — indicating that their purpose was to commemorate Weston's most profound artistic influences up until that point, while also functioning as a visual embodiment of what the photographer was hoping to achieve — including his desire to blend classic form with contemporary subject matter."²

Blending classical form with contemporary subject matter is a defining characteristic of modernism as well as a core component of both Hokusai and Picasso's practice. Weston follows a similar trajectory as evidenced by his figurative studies from Mexico. Rather than relegating Weston's Mexican work to a transitional period and precursor to modern abstractionism, it marks the photographer's severance from conventional photographic praxis. Weston expresses this sentiment best, "I leave for Mexico City in late March to start life anew. Why—I hardly know myself—but I go." Therefore, it's arguable that these three prints reflect Weston's newfound goals to recast traditional figuration after absorbing the lessons of avant-garde abstraction.

Weston's exhibition of his progressive work alongside the two masterpieces by Hokusai and Picasso can be taken as the photographer's assertion of what he felt should be the next natural

¹ Edward Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston* (New York: Aperture, 1990), 20

² Leslie Furth, "Starting Life Anew: Mexico, 1923-1926," in *Edward Weston: Photography and Modernism*, ed. Theodore E. Stebbins (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 20

progression not only for his artistic explorations but for Modern art. Furth's argument about form is also essential concerning Weston's shifting approach, which he began experimenting with in Mexico and would continue throughout his career. The following chapters will outline the suspected impact of Hokusai and Picasso's prints from his Mexican Period. Then the last chapter analyzes how Weston's aesthetic changes after being introduced to the work of contemporary Mexican modernists such as Diego Rivera. This chapter will also assess how different artists represent the exact figure but through different mediums and context, as Modotti became an artistic muse for Rivera.

2. Literature Review

Since Edward Weston died in 1958, his work has been revisited. Inaugurated in 1983, Van Deren Coke, together with Amy Conger, produced the first retrospective of the photographer's work in Mexico. This scholarship offers new insights into the historical context leading up to and during the photographer's residency in Mexico from 1923 to 1926. The first study focused solely on the photographer's experience in Mexico; it provides a detailed chronology of his interactions with Mexican artists, previously assessed only through personal accounts in Weston's Daybooks. This source gives insight into Weston's financial struggles during his stay. His lack of commercial success forced him to operate on commission, leading him to perceive much of his work as a failure. Finally, this text makes preliminary attempts to indicate how Weston's exposure to non-Western artistry and his association with Mexican modernists impacted the development of his artistic practice. Weston's awareness of modern artistic movements, including Cubism, is also mentioned as potential point of reference. Even though these connections are stated rather than analyzed, their inclusion alone is critical to our understanding of Weston's life from these three crucial years in his career.

Conger's essay for the exhibition catalog builds on her doctoral dissertation, in which she identified 900 Weston photographs made before 1927. Conger explains that the pictures incorporated appear to be relatively unknown but have sustaining aesthetic interests and thus can be used to expand the public's awareness of Weston's oeuvre. In the preface, Conger notes that before this study, only 40 of Weston's prints from 1923 to 1926 have been frequently reproduced, whereas she uncovered more than 600 important images.

Despite having recognized this significant gap in Weston's practice, Conger characterizes this period of Weston's life by categorizing his images merely chronologically concerning the artist's stylistic transition from Pictorialism to Modernism. Although often referred to as the photographer's formative years, this issue persists in the work of Weston scholars: prints from this period are seen as either experiments or precursors to modern abstractionism and therefore fail to acknowledge the significance of the period itself. This problem is especially prevalent within the critical discussions of Weston's nude figurative studies.

Coke and Conger's assessment of Weston's portraits and figurative studies falls short in their insistence that the photographer's approach remains pictorial despite considerable evidence indicating otherwise. Coke writes that:

“pictorially, Weston made the most of their beautiful, distinctive heads while conveying his subjects' personalities. His photographs monumentalised these personalities, and spoke eloquently of a new consciousness of Mexico's great potential as well as the photographer's keen insights and skills with the camera.”³

Coke admits that Weston's Mexican period finalized Weston's liberation from the lure of pictorial photography, the salons, and their fancy awards for sentimental pictures. Still, the author is mistaken in claiming that Weston continued to abide by Pictorialist conventions. Aside from Weston's reflections recording his deliberate departure from the aesthetic as early as 1920, there are noticeable visual differences between his negatives before Mexico and those he produced in 1923-1926. Conger provides a more accurate account following Weston's decision to stop submitting to salons stating that: “He tried to dedicate more of himself to his own work, which combined a modern vision with a fairly conventional pictorial technique. His photographs show familiarity with radical developments in other visual arts, and as a result, were not appreciated by

³ Amy Conger, *Edward Weston in Mexico 1923-1926* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1983), xii

the pictorial establishment or by many other people. The aesthetic double standard he was living threatened the integrity of his artistic personality.”⁴ Like Coke, however, Conger cannot see that Weston abandoned all inherent aspects of Pictorialism before embarking on Mexico, a position that this thesis will attempt to defend.

Coke and Conger largely refrain from discussing Weston’s nude portraits — not for reasons that evade controversy like their counterparts — but simply because they do not perceive these studies to be seminal to Weston’s aesthetic. Coke writes that Weston’s Mexican nudes were only marginally different from those he had done in his last two years in Glendale aside from overt displays of pubic hair and some that were more abstract than earlier examples which readily recall Brancusi in their heretic simplicity.⁵ Scholars frequently refer to Brancusi when discussing Weston’s prints of Anita Brenner because of their compositional similarities and his references in his Daybook entries, further substantiating his effect on Weston. However, Coke is correct in his assessment that Weston’s still-lives from the Mexican period offer more significant insights into Brancusi’s impact than Weston’s initial Brenner nude series.

Based on this and a few other sparse comments about Weston’s nudes, the authors consider Weston’s nude studies of Anita Brenner superior to Tina Modotti. Like most Weston scholarship, following the publication of the photographer’s Daybooks, Conger relies mainly on the photographer’s notion regarding the strength of his negatives. Conger’s essay echoes Weston’s sentiment that he believed these to be his best to date. As is the case with most artists, they often consider their most recent work to be their greatest achievement. Modernist scholars have also viewed these nudes as superior to Weston’s other Mexican studies because their stylistic

⁴ Amy Conger, *Edward Weston in Mexico 1923-1926* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 3-4

⁵ Conger, *Edward Weston in Mexico 1923-1926* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1983), xi-xii

development suggests more of an evolution toward modernism. The modernist narrative cannot allow for the female nude as a space of continued exploration within the photographic medium and has difficulty moving beyond abstraction, which is the true goal of modern art. Throughout Weston's career, he pursued different avenues of research, each of which helped shape his aesthetic in different ways. Stebbins says that:

“Weston saw each nude subject anew; each one becomes a portrait of a type, if not an individual. Wardell connotes power and grace; Anita Brenner became abstract, natural form; Neil, the perfection of youth; Miriam Lerner, expectant sensuality; Tina Modotti, the ultimate, inviting woman - and so on.”⁶

Furthermore, Weston did not feel it was appropriate to classify his figurative studies as abstract and instead referred to them as 'elemental' or as expressions of 'simplified form'.

Perhaps noticing the lack of critical discussion of Weston's nudes in Conger's retrospective, Theodore E. Stebbins produced *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes*. Released six years after the first retrospective of Weston's Mexican work, this is the first major publication devoted to Weston's portraits and nudes, and was made to accompany the traveling exhibition that went to LA, Cleveland and Boston. This study provides a chronological interpretation of Weston's photographs from his early works through 1948. As is characteristic of a Weston retrospective, Alan Shestack's prefaces the catalogue by pointing out that the variety and breadth of his photographic oeuvre remains largely unknown. Shestack summarises this issue by explaining that reproductions of Weston's prints are of natural phenomena and inanimate objects, which have become synonymous with the public's perception of the photographer's aesthetic. Weston's landscapes and still-lives are often reproduced instead of his portraits and nudes because they allegedly demonstrate his pioneer Straight photography aesthetic in a less provocative manner.

⁶ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 19

Sadly, this distinction subjects the photographer to added criticism and has been used to perpetuate averments that all Weston images, including nonfigurative studies, are inherently sensual. Nancy Newhall elaborates on this issue which I will return to later in this chapter.

As in the Conger, Weston's work is associated with Pictorialism, but in this volume, Stebbins can recognize that the second half of the Mexican photographs moves away from Pictorialism. Unfortunately, Stebbins also relegates the photographer's work from this period to a transitional status rather than being seen in its terms. Like Conger, Stebbins also chose to use less-known prints from William H. Lane's collection to expand the public's awareness of Weston's complete oeuvre. Shestack explains that the magnitude of this collection, which contains 2000 prints, has allowed scholars to see Weston's range of aesthetic interests, including the most extensive compilation of the photographer's exceptional figurative work and portraiture, which, upon examination, appear to be at the very core of his oeuvre.

Formulating comprehensive retrospectives of Weston's photographic career continues to evade scholars due in part to the sheer volume of Weston's unpublished private collection, which has only recently been brought to light. This has greatly limited the scope of the studies and has led to preliminary conclusions or a lack of significant novel insights. Stebbins, however, had access to over 2000 images. While he only chose to include 75 full-size plates of Weston's and 75 smaller illustrations, he conveys the importance of Weston's figurative work in nudes and portraiture in relation to other modernist subjects and aesthetics. As we learned from Conger's studies, 75 images can only be considered a marginal representation of the photographer's earlier works, let alone serve as an accurate representation of the photographer's career as a whole. Stebbins' 75 smaller illustrations, however provide several critical insights into the photographer's influences, many of which have not previously been explored. Stebbins' scholarship builds on Conger's

references to modern artists, but he also poses additional individuals he suspects to have impacted Weston's aesthetic. This assessment, Alan Shestack explains, comes from a knowledge of prints that Weston owned, studied and kept for himself; these provide a glimpse into the man himself.⁷

Stebbins was the first to suggest the magnitude of Stieglitz's influence on the photographer. Weston's biographers reference Weston's trip to New York in 1922 as the point at which Weston decided to pursue a Straight photography aesthetic; however, few have traced Stieglitz's influence on the photographer before their first encounter. This is most likely due to their very different aesthetic approaches. That said, the two act as foils of one another where each is considered a master. Stebbins summarizes this best in his statement:

“Weston's nudes are brightly lit, specific, and absolutely here-and-now. Stieglitz images are personal and sensual, but Weston's are somehow universal, while at the same time more sexual. With Stieglitz, hands, breasts, and materials become one, while Weston's pictures are very much about different real surfaces – skin, hair, nipples, sand, wood, cloth. They are, in their way, as abstract as Stieglitz's images, and for the viewer at that time, they would have been even more shocking.”⁸

Furthermore, Stebbins points out that Weston would have been familiar with Picasso and Matisse from reproductions found in Stieglitz's Camera Work. Stieglitz was undoubtedly a driving force for Weston's Pictorial aesthetic, but not after leaving New York. This prompts the question of whether one or more artists took Stieglitz's place as a mentor in the second half of Weston's career.

Weston refers to Picasso more than any other artist in his Daybooks. In April 1921, Weston gave a lecture in Los Angeles in which he recommended Arthur J. Eddy's book *Cubists and Post-Impressionism*. It is worth noting that the photographer does not refer to any other Cubists in his

⁷ Alan Shestack. Preface to *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes*, by Theodore E. Stebbins, 7. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989).

⁸ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 16

entries. That being said, Weston incorporated numerous Cubist elements into his practice after 1920, from which the strongest examples come from his Mexican period. Stebbins provides much-needed visual analyses of Weston's Cubist portraits and nude figurative studies including the Tina Modotti series, and his description is as follows:

“The feeling of experimentation, the slight touches of uncertainty, are gone. With Margrethe images, one admires what Weston has done in formal terms - the textures, the shadows, his filling every inch of the composition; with those of Tina, one simply does not notice those things. The picture of her lying on her back, her legs crossed and her arms folded behind her head seems sumptuous both as an image of archetypal woman, and as a work of art. The contrast between this image and that of Weston's Pictorialist, self-consciously alluring nude of 1918 could hardly be greater; now both subject and photographer seem completely comfortable with the fact of nudity, and with the body itself. Here the next one in the series, raking light and nearly black shadows play a crucial compositional role. In the second picture, Tina lies or knells in the sunlight, her head invisible, in an asymmetrical position that is somehow balanced and contained by the triangular shaft of light at the top of the composition, and by the strange, dark shadow she herself casts on the blanket.”⁹

Here Stebbins has chosen to discuss two out of six in the series. Stebbins' assessment of multiple images is essential in bringing out the series' significance since scholars typically only address one of the images or discuss them as a whole. Although these nudes are captured within the same time frame, location, and lighting conditions, each image is unique. Stebbins also addresses the criticism that one of images received because of 'incorrect drawing' followed by Weston's defence of the image on the basis that Picasso too got his 'inspiration' to use false perspective from amateur photographs.¹⁰ Both Conger and Stebbins incorporate Weston's references to Picasso but any connections beyond Cubism have not been explored.

Edward Weston: Photography and Modernism is the third volume produced by the Boston Museum of Fine Art, which examines the greatest works of Weston's career, his stylistic

⁹ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 18

¹⁰ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 145

development, and how he responded to contemporary modernists. Unlike the two earlier more specialized exhibitions of Weston's career, Stebbins returns to more iconic prints that resonate with the mainstream of modern art best to illustrate the photographer's work alongside other artists. The 1999 exhibition catalog pans out to the more extensive art historical influences and models with a teleological narrative about coming to fruition in modernist terms after 1927. This relegates the Mexican work to a transitional period that deflects attention away from the female nudes in favor of the social-political engagement that Weston immortalized with his heroic head portraits.

Leslie Furth's essay is dedicated to Mexican period where she summarises Weston's trajectory as a fairly consistent evolution towards greater simplification, isolation, and abstract forms.¹¹ Despite the promise and fulfillment of the new subject matter that Mexico brought him, Weston admits that he needs help finding appropriately modern subject matter in the historically rich country. As a result, Weston often separates his subjects from their surroundings. Earlier examples from the period where Weston incorporates subject matter into the surrounding background are categorized either seen as romantic deviations on his road to modernism or cubist experimentations. The modernist narrative persists in Furth's interpretation in that prints are evaluated based on a linear progression culminating in abstraction. Furth and other theorists fail to acknowledge that Weston's experiments with several nonobjective motifs and abstraction are simply one of his many modes.

Akin to previous scholarships of the Mexican period, Furth prioritizes Weston's portraits over the artist's figurative work. Weston's heads can be described as hyperrealistic idealizations. Their allure stems from the artist's rendering of influential figures glorified as a result of the artist's technique—subjects are isolated, captured from below, encompassing the frame while performing

¹¹ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Edward Weston: Photography and Modernism* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1999), 28

an action often associated with their insurgent narrative. This portrayal dignifies their ‘heroic’ stature but should not be taken as political statements. Just as earlier schools relied too heavily on the Daybooks entries for their interpretations, recent scholars exacerbate the photographer’s affiliation with members of the Mexican resistance to substantiate that these portraits are inherently political.

While Weston was keenly aware of the photographer’s responsibility to document his surroundings and fortunate to have befriended several critical political figures during his stay, it is reductive to limit his photos of the turmoil that followed the Mexican Revolution to political documentary alone. Weston’s stylistic development correlates with his relationship to Mexican modernists; however, their prodigious portrayal is not so much political as it is a testament to the sitter’s strength; alluding to any symbolism beyond basic figurative exploration would be a misinterpretation. Instead, the heads reflect the artist’s kinship during those three years. Although many are of political figures, many of these portraits are of people with little to no political affiliation but are significant to Weston alone. These include Rosa Rolanda, Nahui Olín, Guadalupe Marin and of course Tina Modotti.

Although Furth’s discussion of Weston’s portraiture from the period focuses on heroic heads, she also comments on the photographer’s nude figurative studies. Weston’s innovation in his work with the nude in Mexico was his approach to the human form outdoors, which he began with the Tina series. Furth recognizes that the nude series of Tina signals a transition between Weston’s early nudes and the radically cropped views of Miriam Lerner that would follow.¹² Sadly, this results in the collection’s treatment merely as portraits and precursors to later, more

¹² Theodore E. Stebbins, *Edward Weston: Photography and Modernism* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1999), 42

abstract, figurative studies. Furth also indicates that these photographs underline the relationship between the developments in Weston's work and the art theory of the Mexican avant-garde.¹³

“The composition may reflect the Mexican muralists' concern for pictorial order. This pursuit of rigorous proportional harmonies that is so evident in Rivera's work probably had its origins in that academic training. This foundation was reinforced by his exposure to Paul Cézanne's architectonic compositions and solidified in Rivera's cubist period, during which he created mathematically rigorous arrangements articulated with abstract geometric shapes. In Mexico, Rivera and others used both intuitive and planned systems that relied on Cézanne and Cubism as well as their ultimate source in the golden section, an ancient system of organizing proportionally related pictorial elements.”¹⁴

Weston's geometric structure employs Cubist techniques and aligns with the muralists' hierarchical approach to the figure, but Furth's claims of pictorial order are not substantiated. In this series, Weston does not abide by divine proportions. On the contrary, he employs techniques that include false perspective or 'incorrect drawing,' as Picasso called it, which directly violates these principles.

The consensus among scholars is that the photographer's awareness of contemporary artistic developments in various mediums impacted his practice. As Stebbins pointed out, Weston was an avid reader of *Camera Work*, where the photographer was presumably first introduced to other contemporary modernists. By 1911 *Camera Work* reproduced avant-garde work in other mediums including Matisse, Cézanne, and Picasso who Stieglitz described as “the one who will count.”¹⁵ Stebbins' in his forward also records Stieglitz's 1912 response to a letter complaining that a Cubist drawing by Picasso had been included in the magazine. To this Stieglitz allegedly responded, “you don't understand what Picasso and co. have to do with photography!”¹⁶ an exchange that Weston was likely aware of. Scholars refer exclusively to Picasso's Cubist period in reference to Weston's work, and his employment of these techniques are frequently discussed

¹³ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Edward Weston: Photography and Modernism* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1999), 42

¹⁴ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Edward Weston: Photography and Modernism* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1999), 42

¹⁵ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Edward Weston: Photography and Modernism* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1999), xii

¹⁶ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Edward Weston: Photography and Modernism* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1999), xii

in landscapes, urban scenes, and occasionally in portraits from his Mexican period. Weston's aesthetic during this time clearly possesses components derived from Cubism, however, his fascination with the Spaniard goes beyond this deconstructivism, as this thesis will address in the following chapter.

The final issue that needs to be addressed within the scholarships of Edward Weston is sensuality. Nancy Newhall expresses the difficulty towards the road to publication for *Edward Weston's Book of Nudes* as a result of the public's distaste towards photographic images that exhibited the raw female form. The bare female figure is a staple of art history. However, its value in art photography had yet to be determined in the twentieth century. The Pictorialist school allowed for a romantic rendering of the nude figure whose soft focus paid homage to traditional techniques and Symbolist aesthetics. By opposition, Weston's straightforward photographic approach did not attempt to hide or blur the figure in any way—thus leaving critics unsure of how to assess the forms beyond their overt sensuality. Weston's genius, according to few but notable contemporaries, includes some of the most forward photographic minds of the twentieth century, not least of whom Nancy Newhall. Called upon to be the photographer's official biographer, Newhall was deeply concerned with the photographer's legacy during the final years of his life. Prompted by Newhall in the 1950s, Weston had also considered creating a retrospective dedicated to his work with the nude—the most reoccurring motif of his career. However, these efforts were often halted for their lack of commercial appeal.

Although it was written in the 1950s, the *Book of Nudes*, a collaboration between Nancy Newhall and Weston, did not get published until 2007. While the title promises to be a comprehensive account of Weston's nude studies, it highlights only the modernist and formalist aspects of works made after 1927. Furthermore, the agenda focuses on de-eroticizing the nudes

and stilllives. As a result, this volume ultimately confirms Weston's commercial difficulties throughout his life since his abandonment of Pictorialism. Through the problem of getting the book published, the text informs the historiography of Weston in its attempt to evacuate subject matter from his representative images of the female body. Thankfully scholars now have the necessary resources to reexamine the variety of Weston's nude figurative exploration without fear of marginalization or censorship, even when treating their potential eroticism.

This thesis emerges from sentiments similar to those of previous Weston scholars: the variety and breadth of the photographer's nude figurative studies remain largely unexplored. It focuses on the Mexican period, which is still often overlooked or misinterpreted. Finally, it comes from frustration in understanding the artistic importance of modern contemporary movements—including but not limited to Cubism—in correlation with the photographer's aesthetic development in this period since it has not yet been the object of any serious visual analysis. For that reason, it focuses on a specific case study, *Tina Modotti nude on the Azteca*, as a way to understand the intersecting aesthetic issues that Weston was grappling with, rather than a mere transitional period in his oeuvre. After a close visual analysis of photographs and bringing to bear Weston's writings, this thesis will examine the visual relationship between these photographs and Picasso's work from the turn of the century through to the early 1920s, as well as those Mexican realists whose practice also evolved as an offshoot of analytical Cubism. Unlike in previous scholarship, these relationships will not be explored simply from a biographical perspective but through a comparative visual analysis. Ultimately, that is missing from previous studies, without which his engagement with the work of Picasso and Rivera is restricted to offhand remarks.

3. Hokusai

Weston's Daybook entries indicate that the photographer is not only familiar with radical modern aesthetic developments from the East but references them throughout his experience in Mexico. While Weston does not indicate which specific print he owned, his mention of the artist is enough to list him as an aesthetic reference while abroad. Since there is no clear indication of which print Weston exhibits in his study, that chapter will draw conclusions based on Hokusai's artwork and his most famous individual prints. Katsushika Hokusai is a Japanese artist specializing in ukiyo-e printmaking during the Edo period. The traditional Japanese genre of Ukiyo-e is a relief form of woodblock printing. Weston's interest in this medium signifies a shift in his aesthetic development by demonstrating his interest in the negative and the formal construction of an image. In addition, Weston's newfound interest in architecture is also addressed since it pertains to Hokusai's aesthetic.

Weston exhibits an interest in emulating Japanese expressionism as early as 1920 while working with his first muse, Margrethe Mather, who Weston describes as, "the first important person in my life."¹⁷ Stebbins comments on Weston's shift in aesthetic interest which can be seen through Weston's print of *Margrethe in my Studio* (figure 1). According to Stebbins, "with its Japanese design, she looks like a dancer about to go onstage."¹⁸ In addition to design elements, Weston begins to include iconographic references to Japan within his portraiture. In Weston's *Hands & Kimono* (figure 2), Modotti is represented wearing traditional Japanese clothing. Weston

¹⁷ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 145

¹⁸ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 15

continues to work with the *Kimono* within his nude series of Modotti, as seen in Print 1. The Kimono is also heavily featured in Hokusai's prints and is used to add decorative elements while being characterized as a Japanese symbol.

Hokusai experiments with several reoccurring motifs throughout his artistic career. Through slight compositional variations, Hokusai explores imagery that is both profoundly personal and representative of Japanese culture. *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* famously exhibits this phenomenon. Through multiple versions, Hokusai expresses his unique devotion to the mountain while privileging its status to make it a symbol of Japanese national identity. The series includes various landscapes and cityscapes, including depictions of Mount Fuji across different locations, weather conditions, and narrative scenes. While the mountain is not always the focal point or subject of each print, its consistent presence helps unify the s into a singular collection. Hokusai's revisitation and reinterpretation of this personally significant motif are comparable to Weston's multiple reiterations of the female nude at various points in his career.

Similar to Hokusai, Weston also deals with reoccurring motifs. During Weston's aesthetic changes throughout his career, his commitment to reinterpreting the female nude is consistent throughout. As a result, these two avenues became Weston's primary areas of exploration during the three years he spent in Mexico. Stebbins catalogues Weston's work while in Mexico explain that "within months, Weston went on to make a small group of his finest portraits, all made outdoors in the same heroic mold."¹⁹ In this context, Stebbins is referring to the photographer's heroic heads series, which features a series of portraits of those closest to him at that time. Stebbins elaborates on Weston's aesthetic stating that "as remarkable as these portraits were the nudes that Edward made of Tina in Mexico."²⁰

¹⁹ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 17

²⁰ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 17

Weston's revolution with portraiture and figurative studies stems from his desire to use natural light and work outside. This revelation began for Weston when he produced his first negatives with the intention of cloud formations on the boat ride to Mexico. Weston records his persistent interest in clouds over the next few years, where he reveals that, "Clouds have been tempting me again. Next to the recording of a fugitive expression, or revealing the pathology of some human being, is there anything more elusive to capture than cloud forms! And the Mexican clouds are so swift and ephemeral, one can hardly allow the thought, 'is this worth doing?'"²¹ Weston's reluctance to capture clouds may have stemmed from a fear of being derivative. In the year prior, Stieglitz began working on his *Equivalents* series where the photographer sought to create abstract images through ethereal forms. Weston's pursuit of cloud formations did however lead him to creating arguably his most important nudes from the period. On July 9th, 1924, Weston's description of the event is as follows:

"I saw Tina lying naked on the azotea taking a sunbath. My cloud "sitting" was ended, my camera turned down toward a more earthly theme, and a series of interesting negatives was obtained. Having just examined them again I am enthusiastic and feel that this is the best series of nudes I have done of Tina."²²

By working outside, Weston's develops a significant interest in architecture. Weston admits to struggling to find appropriate subject matter within the historically rich nation. After the success of *Armco Steel* Weston writes, "I should be photographing more steel mills or paper factories, but here I am in romantic Mexico, and willy-nilly one is influenced by surroundings. I can, at least, be genuine."²³ With this in mind, Weston reveals that he often came to the roof for clarity. According to Weston, "The tile roof to what once was a cowshed is a fine vantage point from which to view

²¹ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 83

²² Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 83

²³ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 21

the country.”²⁴ Through viewing the world as well as his subjects, Weston isolates his figures as well as focus on creating modern forms out what is currently in front modern subject matter through the geometry of the structure.

Hokusai expresses a similar concern with architecture within his *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* series. *Mitsui Shop at Surugachō in Edo* (Figure 3) is a rendering of Kimono shop on the right with a similar building reflected on the opposite side. Although the second building is mostly out of frame, its geometric structure provides harmony to the image. While Hokusai is known for asymmetrical compositions, his prints equate a sense of balance. For example, the triangular profile of the roof is reflected not only through the shape of the mountain but through the linework of the kite.

Like Hokusai, Weston is also concerned with creating iconic images. Hokusai’s *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* includes *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (figure 4). Although *The Great Wave* is part of a series, the image occupies a significant place in modern visual culture on its own. Weston’s series of *Tina Nude on the Azteca* functions in a similar way, where each print sustains its unique aesthetic interest. While each print from Weston’s series contains its own thematic explorations, there are unifying elements such as location and subject matter which aid in making it a series.

Technical similarities between *The Great Wave* and Weston’s nudes of Modotti are also apparent. Both Hokusai and Weston’s prints utilize perspectival manipulation. *The Great Wave* involves a dramatic manipulation of space in which Mount Fuji is dwarfed by the enormous wave. As a result of this stylistic choice, *The Great Wave* is often misinterpreted as a tsunami. Created in the style of tradition of Ukiyo-e printmaking, *The Great Wave* stems from Hokusai’s

²⁴ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 19

imagination and not the natural world. The term *ukiyo* which translates to the “floating world” embraces extravagance and excess which contrasts the everyday view of society. Therefore, the giant scope of Hokusai’s waves should be assessed through a sociological lens as opposed to deriving from the natural world.

Weston’s manipulation and use of false perspective can be seen in Print 2. In Weston’s composition, Modotti is fragmented and photographed from the waist up. The photo’s orientation and its near-seamless blend with the background help flatten the image within the picture plane. The tiles contrast Modotti’s body to draw the viewer within the composition further. Like the hard-edged outlines made by woodcuts, Weston positions Tina among the roof tiles so that their framing compliments the natural outline of her body. Weston writes that, “I am stimulated to work with the nude body, because of the infinite combination of lines which are present with every move.”²⁵ Weston builds off these lines and those of the existing architecture to create additional shapes within his compositions.

This notion of geometry is vital to Hokusai and Weston’s other modernist interests. In print one, Weston creates several triangles that help offset the circles and curvature of Tina’s naked body. Examples of these triangles can be seen through the positioning of his subject’s right arm. Here, Weston has Modotti bend and tuck her hand underneath her back. Within that triangle, there is also a smaller triangle that is formed. Weston creates another triangle by linking Modotti’s elbow to her lower hip through the corresponding line of the roof tile. Modotti’s face and neck also form a triangle where the line is reflected through her legs and carried out of the picture plane. Hokusai also uses fractal geometry throughout *The Great Wave*. The most noticeable triangle is created through the artist’s depiction of Mount Fuji, but triangles can also be found within his renderings

²⁵ Theodore E. Stebbins, *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 26

of the waves. Hokusai also uses the waves to create concentric circles which are evenly spaced throughout the picture plane.

Bold expression of contrast is also comparable in both prints. Hokusai and Weston use techniques that lend themselves to higher contrast during images production and during the printing process. In addition to Hokusai's liberal and strategic use of blank spaces within *The Great Wave*, the artist further intensified the colors during the printing process. Early explorations into the artist's practice led art historians to believe that Hokusai substituted a more vibrant Prussian blue for traditional indigo. Spectroscopic analyses, however, indicate Hokusai's unique technical application, where he layered both pigments on top of one another. The result is darkened without reducing the intensity of the hue. As these comparisons are drawn, Weston's artistic reference to Hokusai and Japanese expressionism becomes clear during his Mexican period.

4. Picasso

Unlike Hokusai, scholars have identified the specific Picasso print from Weston's home studio exhibition in Mexico. Picasso's *The Watering Place* (Figure 5) is created using a drypoint method. Like engraving, drypoint printmaking creates depressions in the surface of the plate. The resulting lines, however, are softer than the hard-edge lines of engraving. By referencing diverse visual mediums, Weston is concerned with yet another element related to form. Compared to the relief woodcut from Hokusai, drypoints are made using positive marks. Therefore, Weston's interest in this print signals a shift in his photographic approach where he begins structuring images based on essential forms rather than subtraction.

The evolution of Picasso's print work is linked to his development as a painter. Picasso's earliest prints are dated between 1904 and 1906. Combined and referred to as the Saltimbanque series, these reductive drypoints reflect a symbolist aesthetic that Picasso explored during his Rose Period. The period contains several avenues of expression while remaining unified by subject matter, simplified forms, and color scheme. Picasso dedicates a significant portion of the period to studying the female nude, which can be seen through his many renditions of Fernande Oliver. Oliver is Picasso's muse as well as a romantic partner during this period. The nature of their romantic relationship is suspected of having signaled Picasso's transition from his earlier Blue Period, categorized by sorrow, into a more joyous mode of expression that utilizes pinks and reds throughout the compositions.

The Watering Place is often linked to Picasso's Saltimbanque series due to its method of production, elemental corporal expressions, and its production date. Picasso dates the piece

in 1906, however, Rivera provides contrasting insight into the prints production. Weston records a conversation with Rivera where he indicates that he, “saw Picasso etch that, it was done in December 1908-I don’t know why he dated it 1906-at a time when he was in his cubist period.”²⁶

According to Rivera, “Many said he had forgotten how to draw, so he did that, among others, to disprove them.”²⁷ While Picasso experiments with different visual art forms, his commitment to drawing is unmatched. While Picasso’s avenues of exploration at various points in his career caused him to move away from painting or sculpting, he never stopped drawing. Drawing is a core component of Picasso’s creative process which he takes very seriously. According to Picasso, “Drawing is no joke. There is something very serious and mysterious about the fact that one can represent a living human being with line alone and create not only likeness but, more than that, an image of how real he is.” The *Watering Place* demonstrates this phenomenon. The minimal line work achieves Picasso’s simplified treatment figures and surrounding background. The content, however, is easily discernible as opposed to his later cubist works, which require a complex understanding of aesthetic principles to make the image readable. According to Philippot, “Cubist painting affirms itself as a language, whose rules are valid and in of themselves, which must be learned accordingly.”²⁸ Seeing as Picasso’s goal is to prove he could draw, one can begin to understand Picasso’s decision to revise the print’s date to a time when he showed he could convey imagery through its most simplified composition.

Regardless of when Picasso created the print, scholars can agree that his artistic trajectory does not reflect a conventional stylistic evolution. Instead, Picasso embraces a diversity of artistic expressions, which he revisits at various points in his career. Philippot explains that “his approach

²⁶ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 31

²⁷ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 31

²⁸ Philippot, “Behind the Line: Drawings and Prints,” 258

does not involve returning to what he has already done, but constant reinvention, creating a series of countless versions, enabling him to grasp the infinite variety of forms.”²⁹ His various artistic phases evidence Philippot’s assessment of Picasso’s instance on formal reinvention. While form is always a principal concern for Picasso, his formal execution differs depending on the period.

While Picasso’s reintroduction of previously abandoned modes of expression makes it difficult to determine the chronology of his practice, it provides insight into his shifting aesthetic interests at different points in time. Picasso’s date change reveals that he is revisiting themes he explored earlier in his career. 1906 marks a significant shift in Picasso’s body of work and approach to figuration. Toward the end of Picasso’s Rose Period, he constructs a new formal vocabulary. During that time Picasso:

“Set out to capture the female nude in various poses. In the space of several months, a new simplification of forms took place. First faces lost their individuality to become simplified and diminished to the stylistic expressions of masks. Then bodies were reduced to powerful volumes, giving them a monumental static quality inspired by Iberian sculpture.”³⁰

Although the Rose Period has not been named as one of the artists' most significant periods, it may have been meaningful to Weston. During this period, the painter worked within new confines of portraiture to create elusive yet haunting images. Picasso's Rose Period features several recurring motifs, including the female nude. The period is classified by the golden hues cascading across the canvases and his treatment of the figures themselves. Building off his previous period, Picasso's approach to portraiture is not geared towards accurate depictions but towards conveying contemporary figures through idealized tropes. The characters in these works are distinctly modern, yet their body positioning embodies classic portraiture from the Renaissance Period and

²⁹ Philippot, “Behind the Line: Drawings and Prints,” 258

³⁰ Philippot, “Behind the Line: Drawings and Prints,” 261

pre-Roman Iberian sculpture. As a result, the contemporary subjects are rendered anonymously within the artist's matrix with their indistinguishable faces and overly simplified silhouettes, begging the question of whether these works can be considered portraits.

In his *Daybooks* Weston records that, "Diego had another interesting note on Picasso, that he was never influenced or went to nature for inspiration, always to other 'schools' of art."³¹ Although Rivera's argument is exaggerated, Picasso frees himself from the illusionist procedure of portraying reality. In 1906 Picasso converts from a sentimental or literary interpretation to a plastic analysis of the female body. Using Gauguin as a reference, Picasso borrows techniques derived from primitivism expressionism including perceptive foreshortening as seen in *Nude on red background* (Figure 6). In this image, Picasso sacrifices the pictorial space to create a flattened rendition of the three-dimensional figure within a two-dimensional plane. The graceful pose is juxtaposed with distortional elements such as the fold in the sitter's right elbow. Picasso draws attention to this through shading and contrasting linework at that bending.

Weston utilizes a similar method of perceptive foreshortening and distortion in Print 2. Weston's radical cropping is identical to Picasso's in that both figures are depicted from the waist up. Other parallels can be found with regard to the subjects' body positioning. Neither subject in Picasso nor Weston's compositions is shown head-on. Instead, their torsos are shown facing away from the camera with their eyes averted despite the subjects' lack of engagement while in a vulnerable state, these images should be construed as voyeuristic. Alternatively, the male gaze within these images is grounded in admiration for the pure human form rather than mere lust. While there are compositional elements to support this argument, Picasso and Weston's

³¹ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 57

affectionate treatment of these figures is likely the result of their romantic involvement. Throughout their careers, Picasso and Weston focused on subjects with whom they were intimate. The idea that the muse is more than just a model but a source of inspiration plays a significant role within both Picasso's and Weston's aesthetic approaches. Scholars have gone as far as to say that Picasso's shifting periods are the results of his current muse at that time. Something similar can also be said about Weston, as he also frequented many lovers, each of whom inspired him to work in a new way.

Picasso's *Nude on red background* also signals the artist's newfound interest in ancient art where the face of the figure resembles an African mask. Instead of painting eyes, Picasso chooses to represent them through slits. These cuts are reminiscent of the holes used for ancient facial coverings. The Rose Period contains the first traces of Picasso's engagement with Iberian sculpture. In *Reclining Nude (Fernande)* (Figure 7), Picasso's approach to figuration merges elements from traditional academic painting with ancient forms of portraiture. Picasso's rendering is unique in that it employs a cut-and-paste aesthetic by combining his interpretation of an Iberian-inflected head with an academically styled body. The Iberian head is recognizable in the subject's defined as well as exaggerated symmetry of her facial features as seen through her pronounced eyes and lips which are segmented by the elongation of the nose. Weston employs a similar cut and paste technique within his nude Modotti series. In this series, Weston photographs Modotti sunbathing on the roof of their building. Unfortunately, due to the architecture of the setting, Modotti appears out of place in the photographs. Modotti's pose, commonly associated with relaxation, makes her look uncomfortable. Although Weston cared for Modotti, he viewed her body as a tool that he could use to realize his artistic vision. As a

result, their relationship suffered and may ultimately have driven her into the arms of Diego Rivera.

Visual similarities can also be seen in another Picasso artwork from 1906. Comparing Picasso's *Reclining Nude with Print 3* from Weston's series of *Tina Nude on the Azteca*, the two images are nearly identical in composition. Both include a single subject as the central focal point of a neutral background lying horizontally on top of a piece of rectangular cloth. Their orientation, size in relation to their frame, and even their proportions are matched. The curvature of the bodies is more stagnant than the images prior, implying that they are posed rather than "snapshots". While the subjects are glancing away from the camera and captured from above, modeling signifies a relationship between the artist and the sitter, suggesting that they are both aware and working in combination to create their individual images. This, in turn, eliminates any sexual or voyeuristic connotations from being cast onto nude portraits.

From 1906 onwards, Picasso grapples with primitivism while also working towards building Cubism. Picasso's approach shifted in 1907 as he worked towards *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* (Figure 8). The artist's drive to reinvent himself has been evident since its beginning. Picasso's primary area of exploration for this proto-cubist artwork concerns various interpretations of the female body. Picasso demonstrates a desire to construct the body by articulating primary forms from multiple perspectives. Weston experiences a similar willingness to redefine his approach to capturing the female nude, as evidenced through his *Modotti* series. As is characteristic of reinvention, both artists exhibit a radical change in their approach toward representing the female form as seen through their prints from the period.

In preparation for *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)*, Picasso's sketchbooks show that he produced a vast number of drawings before settling on its final version. By looking at Picasso's drawings,

we can see how his themes and treatment of the figures evolved over time. Later that year, Picasso fully commits to emulating indigenous African types and to deconstruction as seen through *Dancing with Veils* (Figure 9). Weston's Prints 4 and 5 echo Picasso's *Dancing with Veils*. Both contain an architectural rigor with razor sharp edges throughout. While *Dancing with Veils* is a chromatic reduction and Weston's prints are constructions, both converges into a single formal power. The body positioning of both figures constitutes several compositional similarities including the positioning of the arms as well as the legs. Compared to earlier works, both Picasso and Weston chose to depict the entire subject as opposed to earlier examples which are just from the waist up. This complete figurative exploration allows both artists to play with the natural geometries that can only be experienced through the realization of the total body.

In *Dancing with Veils*, Picasso favors a hatch mark technique compared to traditional shading forms. These hatch marks are also used to convey motion and multiple perspectives. Weston uses a similar approach by playing off the shadows created by Modotti's body. The employment of these visual techniques indicates that they are not concerned with static images but dynamic ones. Weston's decision to photograph Tina on top of cloth with vertical lines as opposed to the more decorative version in earlier prints also echo's Picasso's approach to linework during this time.

Based on Weston's affectionate references to Picasso in his Daybooks, scholars have often connected the artist to the photographer's aesthetic development. Most critics, however, have traced Picasso's influence on Weston only to his cubist period. Yet, as demonstrated by the comparisons above, visual similarities can be drawn between Picasso's compositions before the advent of Cubism. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is not to negate Cubism's role in fostering Weston's modernist aesthetic but rather to reintroduce additional points of reference that have not yet been addressed. By addressing Weston's engagements with contemporary

modern movements in addition to Cubism which affected most American photographers, we can begin to reevaluate Weston as a true artist.

5. Rivera

The modernists outlined in the previous chapters are sourced from prints Weston owned and studied closely. Weston references these works throughout his aesthetic development in Mexico and seeks to emulate various aspects within his photographic approach. Diego Rivera also functions as an artistic reference for Weston during this period; however, their relationship differs from the others mentioned. Rivera and Weston's relationship is based on mural exchange and shared aesthetic interests regarding their figurative explorations. Tina Modotti plays a crucial role in facilitating their friendship and fostering their individual modes of expression. Having served as the primary model for both, this final chapter will compare Rivera and Weston's approach to capturing the female nude simultaneously.

In his *Daybooks*, Weston expresses an interest in Rivera's prior to their first meeting, "for he has lived among the foremost contemporary artists in Paris, Picasso, Matisse, and others and he must know anecdotes."³² Weston's initial interest in Rivera stems from his personal connection to European modernists. While abroad, Rivera's exposure to new and radical forms of artistic expression results in shifts within his own aesthetic approach. Weston undergoes a similar shift after being introduced to the work of Mexican Muralists.

Rivera's formal explorations overseas can be divided into two periods: Cubism and Neoclassicism. Rivera dedicates himself to the study of Cubism between 1912 and 1917. After realizing its limitations, however, Rivera's approach signals a return to order and pivots to neoclassical exploration. Although Rivera abandons his cubist explorations several years prior to

³² Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 17

meeting Weston, the period may still have been of interest to Weston. Rivera's of *The Adoration of the Virgin and Child* (Figure 10) signals the artist's transition into Cubism. The work is representative of his early Cubist style where the artist experiments heavily with drawing and geometry. According to Rivera,

“Cubism constituted an extraordinary adventure...As painters we discovered that vision is not produced by ocular apparatus alone; rather, all the nervous organs take part in giving the sensation of colors and shapes and the perception of distance.”³³

Rivera builds on these ideas when he creates *The Adoration of the Virgin and Child* in 1912 while using the ancient painting technique of encaustic. According to Luis-Martin Lozano, “his use of encaustic had a specific purpose – to enhance the chromatic and expressive power of the work. For Rivera, chromatic intensity was crucial.”³⁴ The encaustic method greatly increases not only the saturation of the colors in Rivera's artwork but also the severity through which they are presented. This contrast is also emphasized through Rivera's use of complimentary primary colors. Based on Weston's interest in contemporary artists revisitation of prehistoric mediums and his familiarity with Rivera's work prior to moving to Mexico, the photographer is likely to have been familiar with this work.

Visual similarities between Rivera's *Adoration of the Virgin and Child* and Print 6 from Weston's nude series of Modotti to further illustrate this argument. Like Hokusai's ukiyo-e prints, the virgin child appears to be floating in midair. In Weston's rendering of Tina, she also seems disconnected from the pictorial surface. Another noticeable similarity is through both artists framing of their figures. Rivera begins by creating several cone-like structures to

³³ Diana Magaloni “Diego Rivera Toward a Mestizo History and Coatlicue of American Modernity,” *Picasso, Rivera: Conversations Across Time*, ed. Michael Govan (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2016), 67

³⁴ Luis-Martin Lozano, “Song to the Earth and Those who Labor Thereon,” ed. Benedikt Taschen (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2008), 134

emphasize his virgin subject as the focal point. Weston uses dark shadows on the outside of the images surface to achieve the same desired effect. In both works geometry to reciprocate shapes found in the natural including the human figure. Akin to the previous modernists discussed, both works feature asymmetrical presentation while remaining unified within the overall image.

Rivera develops an idiosyncratic approach to Cubism that separates his approach from other cubist pioneers. Rivera's desire to maintain readability even within his most abstract Cubist compositions distinguishes his approach from his contemporaries. Another defining characteristic of Rivera's Cubist works is his incorporation of uniquely Mexican iconography. Rivera's famously demonstrates this phenomenon by including fragments of Saltillo sarape within his *Portrait of Jacques Lipchitz* (Figure 11). With this image, Rivera for the first time incorporates an element of Mexican folk art into an advanced profile of internationally accepted modern art. Weston is seen incorporating similar iconography in within his Modotti series. Within the second half of the series, Modotti is photographed with a sarape instead of the Kimono as evidenced by prints 4-6. While Weston is cautious to not represent Mexico in a romanticized way as others have done before him, he is not afraid to include uniquely Mexican imagery within his compositions or to create portraits of famous Mexican revolutionaries.

Rivera's trajectory shows him abandoning Cubism in 1917. Rivera elaborates on this decision saying that,

“Instinct directed me to search for a foundation, a structure. Once that base was established, that same instinct pushed me to decorate the structure, which cannot be humanized if it remains a scaffolding. Hence the necessity to paint fully...and if because of this we are no longer Cubists, of well, all the better.”³⁵

³⁵ Michele Greet “Rivera and the Language of Classicism,” *Picasso, Rivera: Conversations Across Time*, ed. Michael Govan (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2016), 239

Through Rivera's foray with Cubism, he discovered that while its techniques help structure the pictorial surface, they are not an end in themselves. Rivera is among the many artists who towards the end of World War 1 began rejecting extreme versions of the avant-garde by returning to a more classical mode of artistic expression. Picasso, Rivera's former friend turned rival, experiences a similar aesthetic shift. Magaloni explains that "Picasso and Rivera took part in an avant-garde movement that considered the past and the classical cannon as catalysts for experimentation, whereas conservative neoclassicism advocated a return to the past through precise imitation of forms."³⁶ Ultimately, Rivera's ability to seamlessly blend the classical and the vernacular ultimately separates him from European modernists.

In search of new sources of inspiration, Rivera travels to Italy where he becomes fascinated with the artworks of Giotto di Bondone. Rivera reflection on his experience is as follows:

"My three greatest combined experiences of surroundings, architecture and monumental painting took place in Italy: the interior of St. Mark's in Venice, that of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi (Giotto and the *giottescos*) and the Sistine Chapel, with the vault and *Last Judgement* by Michelangelo."³⁷

These elements would soon play a crucial role in helping Rivera develop his signature muralist aesthetic. Working with his surroundings becomes severely important as Rivera transitions from making easel paintings to large scale fresco murals. Most of Rivera's early muralist works were federally funded and as a result were commissioned for public buildings. While keeping this in mind, Rivera's primary goal is to create art that is accessible to the masses. According to Rivera, "As the Ministry of Public Education belonged, more than any other building, to the people, its decorative subject could be no other but the life of that very people."

Rivera returns to Mexico in 1921. The political situation following the end of the Mexican Revolution had transformed the nation into a very different place than when the Rivera left it. The

³⁶ Magaloni "Diego Rivera Toward a Mestizo History and Coatlicue of American Modernity," 55

³⁷ Loló de la Torre, *Memoria y razón de Diego Rivera*, Mexico, Renacimiento, 1959, vol. II, p.91

artistic expression of Mexican muralism was in full swing by the time Rivera arrived. Prior to Rivera's arrival, "Mexican mural painting was, above all else, the expression of a triumphant revolution. That revolution saw itself, like they all do, as the start of a new era."³⁸ Although Rivera continued with the tradition of post-revolutionary depiction, his fusion of European academic tradition separates him from other muralists.

Rivera's begins working on his first mural, *Creation* (Figure 12), in 1921 and completes it in 1923. Within this composition, Rivera seeks to capture the genesis of the universe through his own visual terms. Demonstrating his recent absorption of Renaissance artistic principles, Rivera's composition echoes Raphael's *The Trinity and the Saints*. While Rivera structures the image through Renaissance artistic principles, his imagery remains uniquely Mexican as seen through his earlier cubist works. For example, Rivera includes Mexican wildlife such as the ocelot and the heron which can be seen at the bottom center of the artwork. The most defining aesthetic decision of Rivera's is seen through his figurative portrayal. The figures in *Creation* are clearly *mestizo*, meaning that they are of mixed ancestry. While previously thought of as an inferior race, Mexican artists from the twentieth century sought to change this narrative through claiming that their blended genetic makeup is superior to those from only one country. Akin to other Mexican muralists, Rivera rewrites Mexico's complex history with colonialism by privileging the *mestizo* within the image's framework.

The first works that Weston saw in person from Rivera are from Ministry of Public Education (SEP). Evidence suggests, however, that Weston was aware of Rivera's progress prior to viewing the completed works. While Weston arrived in Mexico in 1923, archives show that Modotti photographs Rivera working on *Creation* in 1922. Therefore, there is a strong possibility

³⁸ Octaviano Paz, "Universidad Autonoma de Chapingo, Mexico" in *Diego Rivera The Complete Murals*, ed. Benedikt Taschen (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2008), 160

that Weston was already familiar with the composition prior to seeing it in person. Weston expresses an interest in the artist's work immediately after visiting the Ministry of Public Education (SEP). In August 1923 writes that, "a few days ago, Tina took me to see the work of Diego Rivera, murals for a public building. Later we met him. It was the work of a great artist which we viewed."³⁹

From that point on, the two became great friends who proceeded to share their most recent works with one another. In one of his *Daybook* entries, Weston expresses that, "Nothing pleased me more than Rivera's enthusiasm. No voluble emotion, but a quiet, keen enjoyment, pausing long before several of my prints, the ones which I know are my best."⁴⁰ The approval that Weston sought from Stieglitz in 1922 which proved unsuccessful, he appears to have found in Rivera. Rivera is most moved by Weston's figurative studies including his beach nudes of Margrethe Mather. While looking at one of the prints from the series Weston records Rivera saying, 'this is what some of us 'modernists' were trying to do when we sprinkled real sand on our paintings or stuck on pieces of lace or paper or other bits of realism."⁴¹ Weston recalls having a similar experience while being given the privilege of choosing a drawing from one of Rivera's murals in exchange for one of his own prints. While viewing Rivera's personal collection Weston writes, "I had my choice from his portfolio sketches, but I found it most impossible to choose. Seldom, if ever, have I so thoroughly enjoyed a portfolio. Diego is a master."⁴²

As time progresses, however, Weston expresses concern for his friend's artwork. Weston writes that, "Diego, unless he gets out of his rut, he has reached his limit; he is going around in

³⁹ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 17

⁴⁰ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 26

⁴¹ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 26

⁴² Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 31

circles, repeating successes, but cold and calculated in their formulation.”⁴³The following year, Tina Modotti fulfills Rivera’s need for a new muse. Modotti continues to document Rivera’s murals throughout her stay in Mexico. Scholars suspect that her and Rivera began their affair in 1926. This theory is evidenced by Rivera’s sketches of Tina for his upcoming murals. The earliest sketches of Modotti are for *Germination* and *Fertilization* which appear that same year. Both murals signal a shift in Rivera’s work where he began structuring his compositions according to his own dynamic principles as opposed to modeling them after Italian masters. Through Rivera’s use of Modotti as a model, his ideas about beauty are still tied to academic tradition.

Germination and *Fertilization* are part of a series for auditorium in the former chapel of Chapingo. According to Rivera, the Chapingo frescos were essentially a song of the Earth, its profundity, beauty, richness and sadness. According to Lozano,

“The theme and formal treatment of the al fresco paintings on the first level (ground floor) resemble the panels that Rivera had painted in the Patio del Trabajo in the SEP a year earlier, upon his return from the Tehuantepec isthmus. The frescos captured the beauty of the tropics; the human figures remain solemn and inscrutable, completely lacking expression. In the tradition of Giotto, their forms evince a geometric synthesis very much in keeping with the compositional severity of Italian primitives.”⁴⁴

While both compositions are related, they each exhibit their own thematic explorations which pertain to Rivera’s overall artistic goals. It is important to note, however, that while both frescos contain universal implications, they are simultaneously explorations into Rivera’s personal feelings for Modotti. Rivera creates several drawings that he combines to create *Germination*. Each drawing features Modotti’s nude torso which can be compared to Weston’s print 1. The

⁴³ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 144

⁴⁴ Luis-Martin Lozano, “Song to the Earth and Those who Labor Thereon,” ed. Benedikt Taschen (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2008), 138

center of the image shows Modotti emerging from the ground like a tree. Here instead of using a sarape or Kimono, Rivera transforms Modotti into another natural matter. This is meant to symbolize a rebirth after the blood of revolutionary martyrs. This theme is also conveyed through the unborn fetus in the right-hand corner. Though Rivera's strategic placement of Modotti, he is able to convey Mexican themes while also using a model that is visually appealing to him. Tina Modotti, who is of Italian descent, resembles the Italian natives from Giotto's artworks. In *Germination* (Figure 13),

“Rivera reveres matter and paints matter above all else. And he images it as a mother: as a great belly, a great mouth, and a great tomb. Mother, an immense womb that devours and engenders everything. Matter is a female figure always in repose, somnolent and secretly active, in constant germination like all great fertility deities”⁴⁵

Weston on the other hand privileges form above physical matter. Perhaps the photographer's most famous phrase, “form follows function.”⁴⁶ Weston does not privilege Modotti in his compositions in the same way that Rivera does. For Weston, Modotti's body comparable to how Rivera's Cubism, where he saw the formative elements as a means to end rather than a solution in itself. Weston reflects this in his description,

“Tina is noble, majestic, exalted; the face of a woman has suffered, known death and delusion, who has sold herself to rich men and given herself to the poor, whose childhood knew privation and hard work, whose maturity will bring together the bitter-sweet experience of one who has lived fully, deeply and unafraid.”⁴⁷

On the contrary, Rivera views Tina as the source of life rather than someone who has been taken advantage of by it.

⁴⁵ Octaviano Paz, “Universidad Autonoma de Chapingo, Mexico” in *Diego Rivera The Complete Murals*, ed. Benedikt Taschen (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2008), 167

⁴⁶ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 144

⁴⁷ Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, 49

Building off the themes in *Germination*, except in *Fertilization* (Figure 14) it is the female forms that are waiting to be fertilized by the revolutionary seed. In this piece,

“This painter’s monumental eroticism leads him to envision the world as a flux of forms, viewed by the fascinated, fertile eyes of the mother. Paradise, procreation, germination under the large green leaves of the beginning. A vast, erotic current runs through all his creations”⁴⁸

Within *Fertilization* Rivera is able to convey his love for Tina while also transforming her into an emblem of Mexican identity. Similar to Weston’s nude studies, *Fertilization* is not purely sexual. Where the two differ, however, is in sentiment. Weston through his nudes communicates that everything can be reduced to its essential form. On the contrary, Rivera uses form as a means of privileging matter where the true beauty in nature can be found.

⁴⁸ Octaviano Paz, “Universidad Autonoma de Chapingo, Mexico” in *Diego Rivera The Complete Murals*, ed. Benedikt Taschen (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2008), 167

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7. Conclusions

In all the modern artists discussed, Picasso, Rivera, and Weston included, figuration lies at the heart of their aesthetic, and that commitment is demonstrated even through their most abstract works. This thesis combats the conventional modernist narrative, which prioritizes abstraction over figurative studies. It seeks to reintroduce this component within the practice of the modernists outlined by demonstrating its centrality within their respective oeuvres. The scope pertains primarily to the artists mentioned above' unique and individual approaches to capturing the female nude. They appear to have had the most significant impact on Weston's aesthetic development during his Mexican period. By highlighting the artistic references of profound modernists with corresponding visual similarities between Weston's prints and those produced in mediums outside of photography, we can see Weston's engagement with contemporary art historical trends and evaluate him as a modern artist as opposed to merely a photographer. This paper also seeks to highlight how vital a muse is for artists. While modern artists are no longer concerned with representing reality, their respective muses inspire them to explore new forms of artistic expression. Their unique interpretation produces very different renderings, as seen by comparing Weston's prints and Rivera's murals.