



Breastfeeding Breasts!

Laura E. Ruberto (August 19, 2008)



In honor of my two young children and World Breastfeeding Month, a few thoughts on the work of women's breasts.

Among Tina Modotti's better-known photographs is "Baby Nursing," with Luz Jimenez nursing a young baby; it was first exhibited on October 7, 1926, in the Galeria de Arte Moderno in Mexico City, and later appeared in a review of the exhibit in the December 15, 1926, issue of Art Digest. Like most of Modotti's work, the image makes visible otherwise overlooked people and places, showing, if you will, the aesthetic of the everyday. As Art historian, Sarah M. Lowe puts it (in describing "Baby



Nursing”):

The photograph [is] tender without being sentimental and descriptive without objectifying its subjects.... The image is tightly cropped so that the geometric roundness of the breast and of the baby's head become significant compositional elements.

([Tina Modotti: Photographs](#) [2], 31)

That Modotti's subjects included a suckling child and mother reminds us of the importance of childrearing and daily, necessary, and very personal kinds of relations, relations that much of our contemporary society judges less than essential. In order for nursing to happen, it's not just biology that has to be in place, but social parameters, a point alluded to by Modotti's series of photographs of mothers and children. In short, she gave recognition to the value as well as the beauty of the relationship between mother and child.





"Children Bathing" (Tina Modotti)

"Mother and Child" (Tina Modotti)

Tina Modotti was born in Udine (Friuli) in 1896 and immigrated to California at seventeen. Her basic biography (Italian immigrant; seamstress; film actress; anti-fascist revolutionary; photographer of Mexico's indigenous people; Communist Party activist; first model and student, later lover and co-worker, to Edward Weston; friend of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera) is out there, knowable. Her status as one of a few early female photographers (albeit in the shadows of Edward Weston) is established in the world of art history. Nevertheless, she's yet to be fully embraced within many Italian American circles. Do a few Google searches with terms such as "[famous Italian Americans](#) [3]" or "[well-known Italian Americans](#) [4]," and you'll see that she's rarely listed. (The reasons for this I'll leave for another post.)

But allow me to return to women's breasts for a moment. August is World Breastfeeding Month, an expansion of "World Breastfeeding Week" (August 1-7), itself a commemoration of the signing of the so-called Innocenti Declaration, adopted in 1990 by a consortium of international organizations, like UNICEF and WHO, which met at the "Innocents' Hospital" in Florence. The document declares the overall benefits of breastfeeding for both mothers and children and suggests public policy goals to further encourage nursing, especially in the first year of life.

It seems quite fitting to me—a woman, a mother, a professor—that my posts on this site would now and then explicitly address this particular trifecta of my identity. Within Italian and Italian American everyday culture, motherhood, and specifically nursing mothers, evokes strong sentiments. Most women, mothers or not, have stories to tell, stories that get shared mainly with other women over the telephone, at the park, in the kitchen, at the water cooler—or on blogs!

Before shutting down my computer so I that I can tend to my own nursing baby girl, I close here with another image of breastfeeding and motherhood. Evoking a quasi-sublime experience, Carole Maso, Italian American author and Brown University professor of English, writes:

This mythic elixir—so elemental, so essential. At the center of our living: a fountain. The very essence of how we live—since we have arrived, since we have been asked to enter this pact: curve of the world—earth bound, earth-linked, the love we pass. I am drinking the stars, the little monk said upon his chance invention of champagne. I look at her drunken, pleased face. That magic potion, her satiated face—a heady brew. With her small hand she pats my breast three times and she is at home.

(Carole Maso, "Rose and Pink and Round," in [The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture](#). [5] Eds. L. DeSalvo & E. Giunta)

Related Links: <http://www.momsrising.org/> [6]

<http://www.lli.org/> [7]

<http://www.comitatotinamodotti.it/> [8]

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/11/dining/11china.html> [9]

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14065706/> [10]

http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2008/06/25/Italian_mothers_bare_breasts_in_protest/U... [11]

Source URL: <http://108.61.128.93/magazine/focus/life-people/article/breastfeeding-breasts>

Links

[1] <http://108.61.128.93/files/3909babynursingmodotti1219117192.jpg>

[2] http://www.amazon.com/Tina-Modotti-Photographs-Sarah-Lowe/dp/0810927632/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1219118245&sr=1-1

[3] <http://www.google.com/search?sourceid=navclient&ie=UTF-8&rls=GGLG,GGLG:2005-3>



3,GGLG:en∓q=%22famous+Italian+Americans%22

[4] <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&rls=GGLG%2CGGLG%3A2005-33%2CGGLG%3Aen∓q=%22well-known+Italian+Americans%22>

[5] <http://www.amazon.com/Milk-Almonds-Italian-American-Writers/dp/1558614532>

[6] <http://www.momsrising.org/>

[7] <http://www.lli.org/>

[8] <http://www.comitatotinamodotti.it/>

[9] <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/11/dining/11china.html>

[10] <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14065706/>

[11] http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2008/06/25/Italian_mothers_bare_breasts_in_protest/UPI-66331214415903/