

Carmen AMAYA

(1918–1963)
dancer and singer

I thought I would be too jet-lagged and timid to start class on the very day that I landed in Madrid. But curiosity and enthusiasm got the best of me, and two hours later, I made my pilgrimage to the renowned flamenco academy called Amor de Dios. While walking down the street, past the market and the fruit stands, I could hear the rapid-fire battering of heels and hand clapping from half a block away. Music to my ears.

For someone who has been studying flamenco for the past six years, visiting Amor de Dios is a rite of passage of sorts. The Spanish dance center has nurtured generations of legendary artists. And, indeed, it was in Amor de Dios that one of the greatest dancers of all time, Carmen Amaya—“The Queen of the Gypsies, La Capitana”¹—rehearsed with her company.

Carmen rose from abject poverty and became the first Roma (gypsy) to become an international star. A tiny woman with smoldering eyes and a haughty manner, she danced for King Alfonso XIII, for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and for Prime Minister Winston Churchill. When she performed for Queen Elizabeth II, *The Times* cover aptly declared, “Two Queens Face to Face.”² She repeatedly filled the largest and most exclusive theaters in the world: Carnegie Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, Westminster Theater, and Maravillas Theatre in Argentina. When she performed in Paris in 1948, it was an unprecedented coup; people stood in line from the Champs-Élysées to the banks of the Seine—well over a kilometer. And she was reportedly the highest-paid artist in all of Paris at the time; her asking price was a million francs a night.

Carmen was a force of nature. Reviewers described her as a volcano, a tornado, a cyclone, a young tiger, a serpent, and “furiously animal.”³ Film clips of her dancing show it all—when she moved, every square inch of her body was alive with vigor and fiery intensity. When she unleashed her explosive footwork, audiences were left dumbstruck. She was not merely a box

