

office sensation, though. She actually revolutionized the art form. Antonio Gades, a renowned dancer and choreographer, said it best: “Carmen Amaya destroyed all my prior conceptions of the dance... I had encountered something that broke all the rules and principles of dance, of everything that one had studied. It was hard to grasp, and it was something else: a force, a feeling. I realized that that fire, that halo, that energy, was impossible to learn.”⁴

She was born on November 2, 1918 in the Somorrostro, one of Barcelona’s poorest slums and an area largely occupied by gypsies. The Roma people, who originated in India, arrived in Spain around the 1400s, and, from the onset, they were an oppressed and marginalized class. Thus their musical traditions and dances became an expression of suffering and release from the hardships of their daily experiences.

Carmen’s father, José “El Chino,” provided for his growing family (six children in all) by dealing old clothes. At night, he wandered the densely packed streets by the seaside, playing guitar for a few pesetas. Out of sheer necessity, Carmen herself began to work at age four. Barefoot, she danced in the local bars and cafes to the strum of El Chino’s guitar. Afterwards—as there was no running water in their home—Carmen would make a routine stop at the public fountain in the neighborhood to take a few precious sips of water before stumbling to bed.

Carmen didn’t fare well at school. Her rebelliousness and independent nature earned her the nickname of La Capitana—a title she would carry with her for the rest of her life. Showing no interest in the alphabet, La Capitana was summarily dismissed from school. She didn’t fare well in dance lessons either. Within the first five minutes of her very first dance class, Carmen was advising the teacher to change his choreography. “He kicked me out. That was the only experience I had with a dance teacher. God save me—that’s not for me,” Carmen recalled in an interview.⁵

Her true education in dance came from two sources: her daily five- to six-hour practice sessions with her father and her careful observations of Barcelona’s great flamenco masters of the time. Omayra Amaya, Carmen’s grandniece and a talented flamenco dancer in her own right, shared some insights on Carmen’s special talent with me: “With no formal study in dance, Carmen intuitively knew which muscles were required to make a line with her body. She not only duplicated the movements, but made it hers by injecting her character and emotions.”⁶

Strength and speed marked her trademark style, and when she let them loose, all rules were suspended. She was the antithesis of anything schooled and systematic. “Instead of one turn, she did two, and violently; she doubled the footwork, and did it with an intensity unknown up to that time, not only in women but also in male dancers...with more than enough time to stop after the first turn, she would give a defiant glare, and then follow with the second turn,” notes Paco Sevilla, Carmen’s biographer.⁷

Predictably, at a young age, Carmen had made a name for herself. As a teen, she was in demand throughout Barcelona, from Bar del Manquet to the Villa Rosa (considered the cathedral of flamenco) to the Teatro Español. During rehearsals at Teatro Español, though she danced barefoot, observers claimed she shook the floor with her forceful, rhythmic pounding. At her debut at the theater, the public could not contain their enthusiasm; they screamed for more. But instead of coming back onstage, Carmen had to run and hide from the police under the overcoat of a singer backstage. Laws forbade underage minors from working. And thus began the legend of Carmen Amaya, the child prodigy with feet of steel.

“ I don’t know how to go through the world *alone*, and if I don’t go with **my people**, I get nothing out of life.”

Indeed, she broke not only a few stage floors but the mold for female dance with her heart-stopping footwork. Carmen’s passion and powerful physique naturally disposed her toward elements traditionally reserved for the male dance. At the time, flamenco for females emphasized upper body carriage and soft, smooth arm movements. (In fact, in some instances, men called *esquineros* would sit to the side of the stage and compensate for the female performers’ footwork by pounding their feet.)

But Carmen’s wiry body, slim hips, and strong legs (not to mention her fervor onstage) gave her just the opposite effect; she was not yielding and soft, but ferocious, scary, and sexy. And her combined lightning-fast footwork and impeccable technique were a feat that few other dancers—male or female—could ever match. “There has been no man who could do footwork at Carmen’s speed...not one!” Florencia Pérez Padilla, a colleague of Carmen’s, once stated. “Her strength lay in what she did when wearing pants... She didn’t need [scenery nor choreography], she was everything and needed nothing.”

Many considered it scandalous that Carmen would present herself in high-waisted pants and vest, like her male counterparts. But wearing pants was not a fashion statement for Carmen; it was a practical solution that freed her to do incredible footwork. And besides, who would be able to see those intricate movements underneath the long train of a dress?

During the 1930s, Carmen was asked to perform in two feature films: *La Hija de Juan Simón* and *Maria de la O*, the latter being one of the most expensive Spanish pictures of its day.