

Victoria OCAMPO

(1890–1979)

writer and publisher

I was walking beneath the towering Jacaranda trees in the heart of the Palermo Chico, one of Buenos Aires's most elegant neighborhoods. Majestic, French Second Empire-style mansions, built by the city's wealthiest families, lined street after well-heeled street. However, as I meandered down one particular road, Rufino de Elizade, I encountered a strikingly modernist stucco house that stood out like a pristine white cube against these elaborate designs. In 1929, when the house was commissioned, neighbors were up in arms, petitioning to have this “abomination” torn down, to no avail. After all, who in Argentina had heard of Le Corbusier? Victoria Ocampo, the owner of this now-acclaimed architectural home and one of Argentina's most legendary women, had.

Argentiniens simply saw Victoria Ocampo as a scandalous non-conformist. In bold defiance of the conservative Latin American codes of conduct, this arrestingly beautiful woman wore short-sleeved shirts and smoked in public. Men hurled insults at her as she drove her own late-model Packard without a proper chauffeur (she was one of the first women in her country to obtain a driver's license). Even her taste in music was controversial; Ocampo championed the talent of musical revolutionary Igor Stravinsky, her idol since she had first heard his *Le Sacre du Printemps* in Paris. (Notably, in 1936, Stravinsky was a houseguest at Ocampo's other Buenos Aires home, the stunning Villa Ocampo, now a UNESCO site.) As a token of gratitude and respect, in that same year, Ocampo recited Stravinsky's *Perséphone* (the libretto was by André Gide, based on his poem) in Buenos Aires and later in Rio and Florence.

It would take decades for others to appreciate that this intellectual powerhouse, whom so many had pegged as a frivolous socialite, was simply ahead of her times. It is now noted that Ocampo has accomplished more in the area of culture than any other woman in her nation's history—perhaps in the history of Latin America. Victoria was a writer, an editor, a publisher, a feminist, described by Jorge Luis Borges as a “La Mujer más Argentina” (the Quintessential Argentinian Woman).

