

It was in her forties, at an age when most women in her culture were becoming grandmothers, that Ocampo set out to carve a career for herself. She founded, published, and ran South America's most prominent literary magazine and publishing house, called *Sur*. In the next four decades of her life, the depth of her talents was truly revealed. She authored more than ten volumes of essays and a dozen shorter works and became a translator, a lecturer, and a friend and confidant of some of the twentieth century's greatest writers and artists.

This is quite a feat for a woman who never had formal schooling. Wealthy girls of her generation were given a gentle education at home by governesses. Everything she did was subject to a strict code of conduct that required unquestioning submission. Obviously, Ocampo refused to follow conventions.

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As her biographer, Doris Meyer, noted, “Thinking back on her struggle to achieve this point of intellectual existence Ocampo has said it often seemed a futile and exhausting enterprise, like sailing against the wind and tide.”¹ So how did she manage to pull herself out of the confines of her class and culture and construct an identity that spoke to her truest needs?

Victoria Ocampo was born on April 7, 1890. She was the daughter of an aristocratic family whose ancestors had sailed up the wide River Plate with the first Spanish conquistadors. The Ocampos were part of a small number of influential families who had great economic and political power. Her father, Manuel, was one of the most respected structural engineers in Argentina. He built roads and bridges in the interior provinces.

Ever introspective, Ocampo once wrote, “We have the memories we deserve. We must inevitably resemble what we remember best since that is what has engraved itself most deeply.”² Ocampo recalled being a willful, quick-tempered girl who operated on a higher level of intensity than her other five sisters. She also identified an early and powerful connection with Europe, formed, in part, by a year her family spent there in 1896, when Ocampo was just six. In the longest stretch, her family had stayed in Paris, where the children had their own French governess. “France began for me when I began to be conscious of my own existence.... France has left an indelible mark on my life,”³ she once said.

Ocampo was only beginning to read at the time, so her first lessons were, logically, in French. She soon spoke better French than Spanish, and, over the years, as she grew up with both French and English governesses, French became her primary language, English her second, and Spanish her third.

Her fluency in other languages opened doors to new cultures and people. On her second lengthy two-year stay in Europe, in 1908, she made up for the relative cultural isolation she'd felt in Buenos Aires by convincing her parents to allow her to attend classes at the Sorbonne, with a chaperone. More than anything, she wanted to explore the worlds of literature and art that her parents' conservative lifestyle denied her.

Ocampo was clear-headed about her needs from an early age. When she was eighteen, she confided to her friend Delfina Bunge, “Never, never in my life will I resign myself to abdicating my personality.... If you only knew where I am aiming, how far I'd like to go, whom I'd like to equal...and all without knowing how to go about it.”⁴ She may not have been clear on her next steps, but Ocampo instinctively knew that she had to actively create opportunities to widen her horizon. She turned to books for a sense of freedom and, soon after, to writing, as an outlet through which she could pour out her hopes and fears as well as her creative talents.

Portraits of Victoria taken during these years attest to her extraordinary beauty as well. She was regal and statuesque, with a classic, oval face, arched nose, and large, expressive eyes. It didn't take long for Luis Bernardo de Estreda, a handsome Argentinian lawyer from a well-respected family, to propose to her; and in 1912, they wed. The marriage was in trouble from the very start. Controlling and suspicious, de Estreda criticized her for being too independent, too inattentive to his needs, and too provocative; unsurprisingly, the marriage didn't last long.

Nineteen twenty-four marked a pivotal year for Ocampo. She was thirty-four when she sold the old house where she'd lived out her disastrous marriage and set out to recreate her life on her own. There would be no more tiptoeing around her literary ambitions now. Much to her parents' dismay, Ocampo had begun publishing pieces for *La Nación*, one of Argentina's most prestigious newspapers. That same year, she met Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian Bengali poet and Nobel Prize winner, who became one of her first mentors. Tagore encouraged Ocampo to start thinking of Argentina as part of a larger world and to consider how she might personally bridge the cultural distances between nations. Their relationship ran deep for the remaining years of Tagore's life. Indeed, he dedicated his book of poems *Puravi: The Child* to Ocampo; and, in one of his correspondences, he shared his hope that she would find some work in her life that would be worthy of his love for her. Tagore saw something in Ocampo that would take the Argentinian public much longer to recognize and respect: her gift of vision.