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# Carmen Toscano

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## Also Known As:

Carmen Toscano Escobedo, Carmen Toscano de Moreno Sánchez, Mrs. Manuel Moreno Sanchez

## Lived:

October 19, 1910 - January 14, 1988

## Worked as:

director, documentary maker, editor, playwright, poet, preservationist, producer, screenwriter, writer

## Worked In:

Mexico

## by David M.J. Wood

As a girl growing up in revolutionary and postrevolutionary Mexico, Carmen Toscano Escobedo was strongly impressed by the family film screenings held by her father Salvador Toscano Barragán, a film pioneer, cameraman, exhibitor, entrepreneur, actuality and compilation filmmaker and collector, forestry and highway engineer, and, in the latter part of his career, a mid-ranking official in Mexico's postrevolutionary government. Many years later, Carmen recalled with fondness and nostalgia, in a poem entitled "Testimonio" reprinted in her 1993 biography of her father:

[... ] cuando mi padre

sobre la gran pared herida por la luz

proyectaba unas sombras con fusiles

e iniciaba el relato como un cuento:

'Cuando naciste en la revolución...' (11)

Carmen's early adult years were dedicated to poetry and literature rather than cinema, and she spent more of her career writing and editing poems, short stories, essays, plays, and poems than she did working in motion pictures. In 1941 she founded the women's literary journal *Rueca*. Indeed, although she would go on to produce, script, and edit one of the towering achievements of twentieth-century Mexican documentary cinema, *Memorias de un mexicano*

(1950), becoming in the process a key figure in the preservation and circulation of Mexico's silent nonfiction film heritage, her involvement in cinema seems to have been a product of circumstance rather than a calling.

Carmen's father Salvador had expended much effort from the 1910s to the 1930s producing and exhibiting historical compilation films narrating the "complete history" of the Mexican Revolution. But by 1937 his energies were spent, and, conscious of the historical value of the material that he had in his possession, he vainly tried to sell a twenty-one-reel version to the Public Education Ministry (Miquel 1997, 91–92). Soon after, Carmen assumed the effort to offload the archive at least in part, involving an apparently fruitless exchange in 1942 with [Iris Barry](#), film curator at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Film Library, and, again in 1945 with MoMA as well as with the British Museum. By the time her father passed away in April 1947, Carmen had cataloged most of the 100,000 feet of actuality film comprising the archive and sent a sample to Paramount Pictures in Los Angeles in the hope of stretching the silent footage to 24 frames per second, an effort documented in the 1947 correspondence between Carmen and Chico Alonso. Alonso, whom she appears to have met during a trip to Los Angeles in August 1946, was Carmen's contact at Paramount.

Her aim was to produce a synthesis of Salvador's compilation to showcase the entire collection in an effort to sell it to the Mexican state. Although once more the deal failed to materialize, the project gathered steam as Carmen, with the technical assistance of CLASA studios (Cinematográfica Latinoamericana, S.A.), set about scripting a fictional voice-over narrative and designing a soundtrack that might make these images work for a modern audience. Half a decade's work paid off when the feature-length compilation *Memorias de un mexicano* finally premiered in 1950, hailed by critics and intellectuals accustomed to Golden Age historical melodrama for its "objective and serene impartiality" (Novo 1.4) that revealed Mexico with "no virtuoso camerawork or actors who, however well they play, we know well that they're only feigning a truth" (Magdaleno 1.3).

Aside from a brief succession of present-day shots in its closing sequence that were filmed *ex profeso*, the *Memorias* image-track is composed entirely of archival footage filmed from 1897 to 1946, although the main body of the film ends in 1924 during the regime of Álvaro Obregón, after which Toscano's actuality archive thins out. The documentary's first-person voice-over, spoken in the polished tones of well-known radio commentator Manuel Bernal, is a fictionalized narration of the last fifteen years of dictator Porfirio Díaz's rule, the armed revolution of the 1910s, and the consolidation of the postrevolutionary regime. Unlike Salvador Toscano's descriptive compilations, which are recounted in an omniscient third-person conveyed through intertitles, Carmen Toscano's *Memorias de un mexicano* is narrated in first-person by a character who lived the vicissitudes of modern Mexican history, which here becomes a family drama of the Bernal character's troubled but loving relationship with his uncle Luis.

By Carmen Toscano's account, the choice of Bernal's fictional voice-over was intended to lend flexibility to the narrative in an effort to fend off accusations of historical inaccuracy. In an

unpublished, undated account held in the Archivo Histórico Cinematográfico, she writes: “the memoir introduces a subjective element that allows the author slight errors and oversights.” Fictionalization did not stop subsequent critics from lamenting the narration’s extreme nationalism. Yet critical opinion, exemplified by film historian Emilio Riera García, has tended to see the intrinsic value of the images as overriding the questionable narration (vol. 5, 355). Today’s viewer, however, might find a certain subtlety in the subjective narrator that echoes Carmen’s own poetic sensibility, as I have written elsewhere. In any case, *Memorias* proved hugely successful, both in Mexico and abroad. It earned an Ariel, that is a Mexican Film Academy award, for the film that best served the national interest in 1951; it traveled widely, frequently aided by Mexican diplomatic channels; and it competed at Cannes in 1954.

Although Salvador Toscano was credited as the photographer on *Memorias* in the original release, it was later discovered that much of the footage was in fact filmed by his colleagues and even competitors. There is now no doubt of the collaboration of Carmen and Salvador, daughter and father, on the enormous task of collecting, organizing, compiling, and editing *Memorias*. Carmen Toscano’s subsequent activities in cinema were largely dedicated to safeguarding and promoting both *Memorias de un mexicano* and the family archive, although her play “La llorona” was adapted to the screen in René Cardona’s 1959 film of the same name. Toscano’s correspondence suggests a hugely determined spirit that was fiercely protective of the integrity of her father’s cinematic legacy. She had good contacts in high places, as her husband, Manuel Moreno Sánchez, was a high-ranking politician in the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party. Yet these contacts were not always quite influential enough to help her realize her goal.

Attempts to get the government to acquire the archive continued unsuccessfully, even though in 1967 the National Institute for Archaeology and History (INAH) declared *Memorias de un mexicano* a “Historical Monument” of the nation, according to *Novedadas* in 1967. Earlier, in 1963, Carmen Toscano had founded the Cinemateca de México with the support of a list of dignitaries constituting a who’s who of contemporary Mexican artists, intellectuals, and politicians. She hoped to place the Toscano archive at the heart of a new national cinémathèque run independently of the state but with government subsidy, however, that proved short-lived (Puente 59–60). In 1976 Toscano directed the semi-documentary *Ronda revolucionaria*, written by Matilde Landeta and coproduced with the state via the National Film Corporation (CONACINE). *Ronda revolucionaria* was screened to a private audience, but remains unreleased to this day and few can speak with any authority about it. García Riera describes the film as a roundtable of specialists exchanging analyses, anecdotes, and memories of the Mexican Revolution interspersed with documents, artworks, photographs, and film clips, and cites a contemporary critic unhappy with historical inaccuracies (García Riera 1992, vol. 17: 296). In 1992, four years after Carmen Toscano’s death, her widower Manuel Moreno Sánchez established the Carmen Toscano Foundation to continue to safeguard the collection now housed in the Archivo Histórico Cinematográfico, the historical archive held by the foundation.

Interviewed by the writer Elena Poniatowska following INAH’s declaration of *Memorias* as a “Historical Monument” in 1967, Toscano likened her 1950 documentary to a pre-Hispanic

pyramid in terms of its national patrimonial value and its right to physical integrity. Toscano was concerned that *Memorias* should not be fragmented or recontextualized as stock shots. Of course this position could be used by critics who found the documentary rigidly nationalistic. Yet at the end of the biography of her father, Carmen suggests that the celluloid monument is rather fleeting:

La aguja de Cleopatra, clavada en el corazón elegante de París y que habla a los franceses de sus triunfos, al turista extranjero le recuerda la grandeza de Egipto y lo mismo pasa con los templos asirios y griegos en los museos de Europa. La historia de la Revolución Mexicana tiene sus monumentos de celuloide (154–155).

So close to political power and yet never quite reducible to it, Carmen Toscano's *Memorias* was perhaps always meant, on some level, as a Trojan horse. Much is yet to be discovered about her work and about the silent actuality archive, one of the most important collection of its kind relating to the Mexican Revolution. In 2011 the Carmen Toscano Foundation agreed to deposit the entire collection in the Filmoteca UNAM, raising the hope that the many thousands of feet of celluloid untouched in decades will finally be restored, preserved, and made available to researchers. Access to this material will enable us to understand the long process of selecting and organizing footage that Toscano undertook during the 1940s; her late work *Ronda revolucionaria* may also be made available to the public. Just as her poem "Testimonio" tells us how her recollection of the Revolution is inextricable from the cinematic imagery imprinted on her from a young age, her extant documentary work is closely bound up with today's historical memory of early twentieth century Mexican history.

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----- . *Leyendas del México colonial: telerrrelatos*. Mexico City: Libro-Mex, 1955.

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Wood, David M.J. “Memorias de una mexicana: la Revolución como monumento fílmico.” *Secuencia* 75 (2009): 147-170.

### **Archival Paper Collections:**

Various archival materials cited above. [Fundación Carmen Toscano, Archivo Histórico Cinematográfico.](#)

## Filmography

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### A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

#### 1. Carmen Toscano de Moreno Sánchez as Director

*Memorias de un mexicano*. Prod./dir.: Carmen Toscano, sc.: Salvador Toscano/Carmen Toscano, ed.: Teódulo Bustos Jr. (Mexico 1950) cas.: Manuel Bernal, sound José de Pérez, sd, b&w, 35mm, 103 min. Archive: [Fundación Toscano \[MXT\]](#), [Filmoteca UNAM \[MXU\]](#).

*Ronda revolucionaria*. Dir./adp.: Carmen Toscano, sc.: Matilde Landeta, cam.: Manuel Gómez Urquiza, ed.: Jorge Bustos (CONACINE/Archivo Histórico Revolucionario Mexico 1976) cas. Ricardo Fuentes, Lolita Ayala, Luis Spota, Yolanda Ochoa, Laura Zapata, Stella Inda, sd. 35mm, 79 min. Archive: [Filmoteca UNAM \[MXU\]](#).

#### 2. Carmen Toscano de Moreno Sánchez as Source Author

*La llorona*. Dir.: René Cardona, sc.: Adolfo Torres Portillo, st.: Carmen Toscano, ed.: Jorge Bustos, cam.: Jack Draper, (Mexico 1959) cas.: María Elena Marqués, Eduardo Fajardo, Luz María Aguilar, Mauricio Garcés, Carlos López Moctezuma, 35mm. Archive: [Filmoteca UNAM \[MXU\]](#).

### C. DVD Sources:

“Toscanito: coleccionista de historias.” Dir. Gregorio Rocha. DVD. (Canal 22, 2010). Part 1 of the television mini-series “Luces, cámara, revolución.”

## Credit Report

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Salvador Toscano has often been cited as both screenwriter and cinematographer of *Memorias de un mexicano*, but he had only a partial role on both counts. The opening credits announce, accurately, that the film is “a documentary made using the script and the material from the film archive of the engineer Salvador Toscano.” Archival research has shown that Carmen Toscano’s script for *Memorias de un mexicano* builds on and coincides with, to some extent, the scripts of Salvador Toscano’s own compilations. But Carmen’s 1950 script differs considerably in terms of length, focus and organization of material, tone, and interpretation. Film historians have also demonstrated that Salvador Toscano filmed only some of the material used in *Memorias*; other cameramen, whose work Salvador acquired to form part of his own archive, include Antonio Ocañas, Jesús H. Abitia, Felipe de Jesús Haro, and the Alva brothers.

# Citation

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<<https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-carmen-toscano/>>