

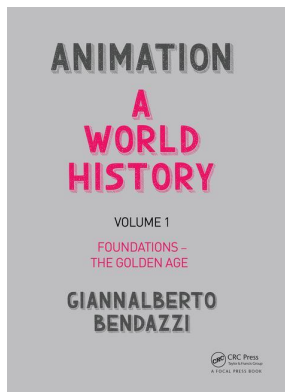
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Silent Latin America

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SILENT LATIN AMERICA

Mexico

According to the *Índice cronológico del cine mexicano*,¹ the first animated film of the country is *Mi sueño*, made in 1915 by an unknown author. The first animator whose name we know is Miguel Angel Acosta² (or Alcorta), who animated some cut-outs in 1929 (Luis Strempler mentions ‘more than two hundred productions of animated films of about thirty seconds each’).³

According to Manuel Rodríguez Bermúdez,⁴ we must also mention painter and poster artist Juan Arthenack (1891–1940) among the pioneers. Arthenack collaborated with various magazines and developed some successful comic strips, such as *Don Prudencio y su familia* and *Adelaido el conquistador*. In 1919, he directed (and starred in) the live-action film *El rompecabezas de Juanillo*, which contained a frame-by-frame sequence in which letters combined until they created the word *excelsior*.

In addition to these nearly legendary artists, the true pioneers of Mexican animation were Salvador Pruneda, Bismarck Mier, Salvador Patiño, Alfredo Ximénez, and Carlos Manriquez.⁵ They learned their trade in the United States during the 1920s at the studios run by the Fleischers, MGM, and Disney and in the 1930s tried to create animation studios in their home country.

Salvador Pruneda (1895–1986) had a complicated political life and quite often had to find shelter across the border:

There he met Bismarck Mier, a young Mexican of German descent (1906–1962), and Salvador Patiño. In the 1930s, back from the umpteenth exile, he founded a studio in Mexico City, producing newsreels, titles, and trailers. In this studio, Salvador Pruneda adapted for the screen the comic strip *Don Catarino y su apreciable familia* that he and Mier had drawn ten years before. According to Moisés Viñas, *Don Catarino* was screened in 1934, but more likely it remained unfinished. Carlos Sandoval, who in those times frequented Pruneda and his collaborators, maintained that no more than ten seconds were actually made, although the magazines published photographs of at least four scenes.⁶ Another Pruneda project was an animated sequence for the live-action film *Revista Musical*, but this one sank, too, due to financial problems.

Colombia⁷

In this country, animation started at the beginning of the twentieth century, with small incursions in contexts like newsreels and the use of very simple techniques such as frame-by-frame object movement. An example of this type of animation is *Garras de Oro* (The Dawn of Justice), a movie produced in 1926. This silent black-and-white film features the separation of Panama and Colombia, ratified in November 1903, and shows, in a quick scene of a few seconds, a hand-coloured national Colombian flag.

¹ Moisés Viñas, *Índice cronológico del cine mexicano (1896–1992)*, Unam, Mexico, 1992.

² See, for example, Juan Manuel Aurrecochea, *El episodio perdido: Historia del cine mexicano de animación*, Cineteca Nacional, Mexico, 2004, p. 15, and Manuel Rodríguez Bermúdez, *Animación: Una perspectiva desde México*, Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos, Unam, Mexico, 2007, pp. 124–125.

³ Manuel Rodríguez Bermúdez, *Animación: Una perspectiva desde México*, pp. 79, 124.

⁴ Manuel Rodríguez Bermúdez, *Animación: Una perspectiva desde México*, p. 124.

⁵ Juan Manuel Aurrecochea, *El episodio perdido: Historia del cine mexicano de animación*, p. 15.

⁶ Juan Manuel Aurrecochea, *El episodio perdido: Historia del cine mexicano de animación*, p. 15.

⁷ By Francesca Guatteri.

Brazil

O Kaiser, by caricaturist Seth (Álvaro Marins),⁸ is considered the first Brazilian animated movie. First shown in January 1917, this very short satire against the war targets Kaiser Wilhelm II. The German leader first dreams of dominating the world but is later swallowed by the globe itself. It may be helpful to mention that Brazil sided with France, Great Britain, and the United States in World War I. A few months later, on 26 April 1917, Kirs Filme released the country's second animated film, *Traquinices de Chiquinho e seu inseparável amigo Jagúnço* (The Escapades of Chiquinho and His Inseparable Friend Jagúnço). The filmmakers were not acknowledged in the film credits. *Avénturas de Bille e Bolle* (The Adventures of Bille and Bolle) by Gilberto Rossi and *Fono* (Eugênio Fonsêca Filho) followed one year later in 1918. The film features two characters, Bille and Bolle, who were modelled after Bud Fisher's Mutt and Jeff, arriving in São Paulo by plane and having adventures there.

For about ten years thereafter, animation was produced only in advertising, mainly by Seth, who had switched to this field.

Chile

Chilean animation was related to Chilean political satire, similar to the animation in Argentina. The first attempt to make a film with illustrations came in 1921. *La Transmisión del Mando Presidencial* (The Transfer of the President's Power) was made by Alfredo Serey, an illustrator for the daily *Las Últimas Noticias*. The silent film was nothing more than a series of still frames featuring the new president Arturo Alessandri, who is shown watching a safe with cobwebs that illustrate the fiscal deficit. This short lasted about ten minutes.

Three years later, *Vida y Milagros de Don Fausto* (Life and Miracles of Don Fausto), a film 'with a million cartoons' based on *Amenidades del diario vivir*,⁹ was published in the magazine *Topaze*. During a time when copyright fees could hardly be applied for, especially in a distant country like Chile, the director Carlos Borcosque simply took the character of Don Fausto, martyred by his wife Crisanta, and adapted his adventures to local realities.

⁸ We know Seth's real name from a short autobiography published on Rio de Janeiro's *Gazeta de Notícias* on 27 July 1947.

⁹ *Amenidades del diario vivir* is nothing else than George McManus' *Bringing Up Father*; Don Fausto is Jiggs, and Crisanta is Mary.

¹⁰ *Roto* means ragamuffin.

¹¹ The film was probably Cohl's *Les allumettes animées* (Animated Matches) of 1908, since in his old age Cristiani remembered that the film he saw featured 'moving matches'.

The film *15.000 Dibujos* (15,000 Drawings) premiered in 1937 and was more akin to the Disney style. The short was directed by Jaime Escudero and Carlos Trupp and starred an anthropomorphic condor whose name was Copuchita and approached the prototype of the Chilean *roto*.¹⁰

Argentina: The World's First Animated Feature Film

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, Argentina's economy was one of the most successful and promising in the world, and its society one of the most advanced and cultivated. However, it was certainly marked by limits and inequalities, especially between elegant Buenos Aires and the rest of the country. The Argentinean cinema industry, on the contrary, reached its most significant stage primarily in the 1930s.

It is a surprising and rare phenomenon that a still little-developed film industry, affected by technological limitations and import and export troubles, could achieve the prolific rate of inspiration that the Argentines did in the difficult field of animated feature films.

Quirino Cristiani

On the fringes of the main cultural industries and currents of the time, Argentina owed its production of animated films mainly to the Italian-born Quirino Cristiani (Santa Gioletta, Italy, 2 July 1896–Bernal, 2 August 1984), who moved to Argentina at the age of four. At a very young age, Cristiani attracted attention with his caricatures, which were published in the daily papers of the capital. When producer Federico Valle (Asti, Italy, 1880–Buenos Aires, 1960) wanted an experimental political vignette 'in action' for his newsreel *Actualidades Valle*, he hired the then-twenty-year-old Cristiani. After having learned the basics of animation from a film by Émile Cohl from Valle's collection,¹¹ Cristiani filmed *La intervención a la provincia de Buenos Aires* (Intervention in the Province of Buenos Aires), an approximately one-minute sketch that made fun of the provincial governor Marcelino Ugarte.

Following the success of the film, Valle decided to produce a full-length animated political satire. Alfonso de Laferrère wrote the text, while Quirino Cristiani took care of the animation and what today would be called the direction; Andrés Ducaud built the models for the impressive sequence of the Buenos Aires fire. In order to attract more publicity to the venture, Valle hired Diógenes 'El Mono' Taborda, one of the most famous caricaturists of the time, for the creation of the characters.¹² (In fact, Taborda worked only partially on the film, bored by the meticulous, slow workmanship needed in the frame-by-frame process.)

El Apóstol (The Apostle) was first projected at the Select Suipacha Theatre on 9 November 1917. Lasting a little more than an hour, *El Apóstol* was the first animated feature film ever made. (No copy of this film exists today, and we must rely on a few written sources and Cristiani's memory. Whether or not *El Apóstol* was actually a feature film is still uncertain¹³.) The plot was quite linear, albeit complicated by several digressions: Angered by the Argentines' moral decay, elected president Hipólito Yrigoyen¹⁴ dreams of rising to Olympus, dressed as the apostle of national redemption. After several political discussions with the gods, the president obtains Jupiter's lightning and burns Buenos Aires in a purifying fire. He is about to build his perfect city on the ashes of the corrupt one when he awakes and returns to reality. Although poorly distributed, the film enjoyed great success with the public, and the newspapers of Buenos Aires pointed to it as an example of the progress of the national cinema.

Cristiani took advantage of his success to leave Valle and work on another feature film based on an episode of the then-raging World War I.¹⁵ Entitled *Sin dejar rastros* (Without Leaving a Trace, 1918) the film was shown for only one day; confiscated for political reasons, it disappeared in the basement of some government office. In the following years, Cristiani became involved with a variety of projects, from advertising to educational-scientific shorts, such as *Rinoplastia* (Surgery of the Nose) and *Gastrotomía* (Surgery of the Stomach) of 1925, to institutional and comic shorts. These last were, as usual, linked to current events: boxing matches with heavyweight Angel Luis Firpo (*Firpo-pobre-nan* and *Firpo-Dempsey*, 1923) or the visit to Argentina by the handsome young Italian prince Umberto di Savoia (*Humbertito de garufa*, 1924).

Along with Cristiani, Andrés Ducaud deserves our attention, although there is only scarce and uncertain information on him. After having worked as a scene designer for Cristiani's *El Apóstol*, Ducaud continued his collaboration with the producer Federico Valle. In 1918, he directed *Abajo la careta or La república de Jauja* (Down with the Mask or The Republic of Plenty), a satiric feature film on the old conservative oligarchy. The tepid reaction of the press was justified by the slow action and overall ennui that characterized the film. Shortly afterward (the precise date is unknown), Ducaud filmed another feature-length satire on the high society of Buenos Aires. Entitled *Carmen criolla* (Creole Carmen) or *Una noche de gala en el Colón* (Gala Night at the Colón Theatre), it was a combination of drawings and puppets, with characters by Diógenes Taborda. The film failed because of its dull, drawn-out pacing and technical imperfections.

¹² Diógenes Taborda (1890–1926) was a real pillar of Argentine modern humorous drawing and comics. He was nicknamed 'El Mono' (the monkey) because of his ugliness.

¹³ Printed documents state that the film was screened for seven months, seven times a day, but we can't deduce the running time from that, as we don't know the opening/closing time of the theatre.

On the other hand, one who wants to get free from the concept of running time could take into consideration that *El Apóstol* was the sole subject of the daily projections and that the definition of a feature film is 'the main film on a cinema programme' (*Longman Webster English College Dictionary*, Longman House, Essex, UK, 1984).

¹⁴ Hipólito Yrigoyen (1852–1933) was elected in 1916 as the first radical (populist) president after decades of conservative leadership. His election was received with hope but also scepticism.

¹⁵ The German secret service had tried to provoke Argentina's entry into the war as a German ally by torpedoing a merchant ship from Rio de la Plata and accusing the English and the French of the act. Although the mission was supposed to 'leave no trace' (in Castilian, *sin dejar rastros*), it was discovered and became a major issue in Buenos Aires. Yrigoyen expelled the German ambassador but avoided any other action that could have undermined the country's neutrality.