

Fictis sua 2. 5



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Anonymous Mexican

1673

A FIRST PORTRAIT OF
SOR JUANA INÉS DE
LA CRUZ

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A First Portrait of Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz

Oil on copper
11.5 x 9 cm

Provenance: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 1673; Leonor Carreto, 2nd Marchioness of Mancera; Antonio de Toledo y Salazar, 2nd Marquis of Mancera, 1673; Private collection until the current day, Madrid.

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This previously unpublished portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz undoubtedly stands as the only (known and preserved) work painted during the life of the poet, and to which reams of pages and multiple works of research have devoted a plethora of theories over the decades, all with the goal of identifying the real face of the most celebrated exponent of New Spanish literature.

The Latin inscription “*Ætatis sua 25*”¹ which we can read in the upper left-hand corner of the copper confirms that this work was painted during the early adulthood of Mexico’s “Tenth Muse” and allows us, taking her birth as occurring on 12 November 1648², to date the execution of this extraordinary historical/artistic narrative to 1673, a seminal year in the life of the poet.

These lines are not intended to add to the immense body of literature that has focused (and continues to do so) on studying the work of the Mexican poet but rather, firstly, to reveal her real face and, secondly, to build up a realistic narrative that will enable us to date and place the execution of the miniature portrait, while also allowing us to debunk some of the hypotheses surrounding an otherwise somewhat fictionalized historiography, which has shrouded the poet in a halo of history-fiction more befitting the quill of a romance novelist than rigorous science-based historians.

I would recommend readers, assuming they have not already done so, devote part of their curiosity to the biography of this essential figure and, in particular, to her literary output. Juana de Asbaje, as she was known before she gave herself up to a religious life, was as misunderstood as she was admired. Feared even, by some, as one fears a fearless woman. Talented, sensitive and extraordinarily intelligent, she did what she could to overcome the obstacles that class and gender put in the way of her intellectual vocation. She learnt to read at the age of three, and dreamt of cutting her hair and donning a moustache so she could enter university, at that

¹ “*At her age of 25*”.

² SCHMIDHUBER DE LA MORA, G., *Pertinencia actual de la primera biografía de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, Estudios de Historia de España, 19, 2017, p.225.

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time the sole province of men from the wealthy classes. The same men she surprised with her erudition when she became a lady-in-waiting at the viceregal court. Her learning refused to be trampled by the demands of marriage, so she turned her back on worldly life and entered (first as a Carmelite, a few months later as a Hieronymite) an enclosed convent, to which she offered up her entire life. A strategically-chosen scenario in which to give free rein to a life of study that she would dress up in the vestiges of faith.

This portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, very much in line with the female and Criollo aesthetic of the day, presents a simple composition: the poet depicted half-length, standing up and almost in profile, an arrangement that differs slightly from the compositional model for portraits of nuns to which we are accustomed³, and which gives the feeling of presenting us with a celebrated figure from Mexican viceregal society rather than a woman living a cloistered religious existence.

As was *de rigueur* for the Order of St. Jerome, which she entered in 1667, remaining there until her death in 1695, Sor Juana appears in a white habit, brown scapular and black wimple. (Fig. 1) Although the *essence* of each of the elements making up the Order's official dress has been respected, she deviates from the norm in the way she wears them, with her ample habit with long, pleated sleeves, that look to reach the floor, reflecting an elegance more suited to Courtly fashion than a cloistered wardrobe. The Mexican poet is depicted against a monochrome grey background which solely emphasizes her figure, and where the only features are a Latin inscription, in white italics, reading "*Ætatis sua 25*" and the heavy green drape hanging on the right-hand side of the copper. This additional compositional element, so unusual in portraits of nuns, is presented as a typical Baroque

³ MENDOZA VILLAFUERTE, I., *Estudio de la producción novohispana de monjas muertas*, Undergraduate dissertation thesis, History of Art, Department of Philosophy and Literature, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Universidad de las Américas, Puebla, May, 2003, p.66.

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iconographic element, and acts as a curtain that is drawn back so we can contemplate the allegory that was her life.⁴



Fig. 1: Anonymous New Spanish, *Dress of New Spanish Nuns*, oil on canvas, 1700, Museo Nacional del Virreinato.

This first portrait of the nun does justice to the many literary references to her captivating and generous beauty. With delicate features and porcelain skin, she evokes the youth of a face that acts as a canvas on which a penetrating gaze with black eyes and thick eyebrows has been drawn, looking out at the spectator in a sort of silent dialogue contrasting with the arrival of her full and sensual lips,

⁴ PAZ, O., *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la Fe*, FCE, Mexico D.F., 2003., p. 358.

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tightly closed and from which the function of communication would appear to have been intentionally stripped.

Respecting the supposed compositional simplicity, and yet infusing the depiction with overtones of allegorical significance, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz appears either bearing or wearing a series of attributes which we should take a moment to consider. Firstly, and this numerical ordering is by no means an indication of importance, but simply an organizational discursive tool, we see how the nun is holding in her stylized and also porcelain-like right hand a little black book which she is gently opening with her index finger. On the ring finger of that same hand we see a ring, whose presence we can interpret in the sense of its liturgical symbolism (that of a mystical union with Christ) or alternatively in the secular sense linking it to wisdom and science.

As such, and bolstering this second interpretation, we see how Sor Juana's left hand is holding a magnifying glass, whose intention would appear to be to honor the art of reading and her devotion to it. Continuing with the compositional structure, and coming now to an element that would be recurrent in subsequent depictions of this (and other) nun(s), we observe the presence of a rich and elegant golden rosary. The cross at the end of it is resting on Sor Juana's left shoulder, while the golden rosary beads of which it is made up are seen falling down in parallel over both sides of her breast. Finally, in the middle of the composition, occupying the space sketched out between the nun's chin and the book she has in her hand, she is bearing the *escudo de monja*, or nun's badge, a *protective symbol of the brides of Christ*⁵, with a pictorial depiction of the Virgin and Child, surrounded by four religious figures for whom the professed nun felt great devotion. What is surprising on this occasion, and this is something I will be addressing in the coming paragraphs, in as far as it is an indication of the work's early execution, is this depiction's inclusion of a "painting within a painting", as it differs from subsequent

⁵ RISHEL, J.J., *Revelaciones. Las artes en América Latina 1492-1820*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Philadelphia Museum of Art and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2007.

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known versions of portraits of Sor Juana in which the scene of the Annunciation appears (Figs. 2 and 3).



Fig. 2: Juan de Miranda, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, oil on canvas, 18th century, UNAM, Mexico.



Fig. 3: Andrés De Islas, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, oil on canvas, Museo de América, Madrid.

Having examined the work's compositional dimension, we see how, from this analytical point of view, it once again constitutes an artistic and historical exception, by not adhering to any of the *nun's portrait* models, as studied and classified by Mendoza Villafuerte⁶, and to which the majority of portraits of nuns belong. Although it does share in, or respect, some elements of the crowned nun genre of portraiture depicting subjects on their profession day (taking of vows), such as the use of a dark background heightening the main central figure, along with a scarcity of decorative elements, it is also clear that the work we are addressing here, where the only attribute befitting the crowned nun⁷ is the ring, and where the traditional veil, crown and palm frond have been omitted, fails to

⁶ MENDOZA VILLAFUERTE, I., 2003.

⁷ DE LA MAZA, *Primer retrato de Sor Juana*, Historia Mexicana, Vol.2, No.1, Jul-Sep., 1952, pp. 15-16

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comply with the barest essentials of said category (Fig. 4). In as far as we accept that *their attributes are what define the depicted subjects*⁸, we feel that this option deliberately and premeditatedly opts to immortalize Sor Juana accompanied by symbolic elements that refer to her erudition, such as the magnifying glass in her left hand and the book in her right, to which I might even ascribe a sort of syncretic interplay. This attribute, key to the composition, invites the more faithful spectator to think of the Holy Bible, while more subversive eyes are allowed to imagine that its pages allude to the more than 4,000 volumes it is said made up the library in the nun's monastic cell and which helped her to break the bars of her never-cloistered imagination.



Fig. 4: Anonymous, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, oil on canvas, 18th century, Museo de América, Madrid.

⁸ PAZ, O., 2003, p. 358.

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Following closely on from what we have just seen in the previous paragraph, and as an argument helping us to exclude the work we are studying here from the *crowned nun* genre of portraiture, we see how our portrait depicts Sor Juana as a thoughtful and studious person, and by no means reflects the moment to which said genre of portraiture alludes, capturing the subject just as she takes her perpetual vows, “dying” forever for the outside world and thereby taking a step towards eternal life.

Como Christo murió por ti, y resucitó, así conviene que mueras al mundo si quieres resucitar con Christo en la gloria. Si quieres vivir con él en el cielo, conviene que mueras aquí al mundo en la tierra⁹

As Christ died for you, and was reborn, so should you die if you want to be reborn with Christ in glory. If you want to live with him in heaven, you should be dead to the world here on earth

Our painting does not fit this analytical category either from an objective point of view, given Sor Juana is depicted at the age of 25, whereas she had taken her vows some years earlier, in 1667, when the novice was 17, or from a subjective or interpretative point of view, when it comes to the subject’s gaze, hungry for knowledge, overshadowing the more expected representation in which seclusion, retreat and obedience are triumphant as a necessary way of life. This pictorial narrative thereby constitutes a chronicle of honesty, resistance and rebellion.

Nor can we categorize this miniature as one of the so-called Portraits of Founders, Prioresses or authorities, given Sor Juana was always (from here until her death) too young and insufficiently orthodox to hold a position of power within the ecclesiastical institution. Finally, and on grounds there is no need to go into in detail here, this first, unpublished portrait of the “Phoenix of Mexico” can by no

⁹ ESTELLA, Diego, Second part of the *Tratado de la Vanidad del Mundo*, Salamanca, 1581, f.110v.

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stretch of the imagination be considered an example of a “dead nun’s portrait”, a genre, however, quite common in the Viceroyalty of New Spain. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5: Anonymous New Spanish, *Sor María Gertrudis Teresa de Santa Inés*, oil on canvas, ca. 1730, Private collection.

This first, unpublished portrait of Sor Juana stands as an exceptional work within nuns' portraiture by not adhering, *stricto sensu*, to the visual models set aside for it, rejecting the required behavioral and aesthetic norms by substituting withdrawal with curiosity, mysticism with intellectuality and devotion with reason. At this point I feel it is well worth contextualizing and situating this peculiar aesthetic and symbolic representation within Baroque imagery in New Spain where, *aware of one's mortal condition, of life's ephemeral nature and the fragility of memory*, the need was felt to *perpetuate remembrance of oneself, preserving an effigy for posterity*¹⁰.

¹⁰ RUIZ GOMAR, R., *El retrato novohispano en el siglo XVIII*, Puebla, Secretariat of Culture, State of Puebla, 2000, p. 9.

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As such, and in accordance with the pretensions of viceregal portraiture (this being understood as a uniform group in terms of its symbolic function), this depiction of the most significant of New Spanish nuns “does not aim to depict subjects with any deep psychological penetration, but rather sought to highlight certain aspects of their persona, especially whether they belonged to a particular social group”¹¹, that of the intellectual elite of the day, and not just another nun. Octavio Paz spoke in much the same vein about other iconographic versions subsequent to ours, and I feel his following



Fig. 6: Miguel Cabrera, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, oil on canvas, 18th century, Museo Nacional de Historia de Mexico.

words are perfectly applicable here: “the figure of Sor Juana Inés does not evoke religion so much as elegance. In these [depictions of her] we observe that greater importance is given over to her erudition than to the spirit of her lyrical [or, I would add, religious] personality”¹². **(Fig. 6)**

Finally, I would like to add that although what we have before us here is an exceptional historical and artistic work, Sor Juana was not the only nun capable of breaking with the limits constraining her existence and her depiction but, rather, she forms part of a limited, brave and much-needed group of religious women who wanted to be different from what was required of them, and who made this clear in their writings and, on occasions, their portraits. These would, of course, include Saint Theresa of Jesus and Sor María Jesús de Ágreda. **(Figs. 7 and 8)**

¹¹ RODRÍGUEZ MOYA, I, *El retrato de la élite en Iberoamérica: siglos XVI a XVIII*, Tiempos de América: Revista de historia, cultura y territorio, No. 8, 2001, p. 2.

¹² PAZ, O., 2003, p. 358. *la figura de Sor Juana Inés no evoca a la religión sino a la elegancia. En ellos se advierte que se concede más importancia a su erudición, a su ciencia, que al espíritu de su personalidad lírica y –añado- religiosa.*

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Fig. 7: Fray Juan de la Miseria, *St. Theresa of Jesus*, oil on canvas, ca. 1576, Convent of the Carmelitas Descalzas, Alcalá de Henares, Madrid.



Fig. 8: Jan Baptist Berterham, *Sor María Jesús de Ágreda*, engraving, ca. 1680, BNE, Madrid.

Before we conclude our description and technical and artistic study of the work, I think it is worth spending a few moments examining the pictorial support used for the occasion as, without intending to embark on a study of the origin, evolution and possibilities of sheet copper in the Viceroyalty of New Spain, I do feel that this could provide us with certain details regarding the possible authorship of the portrait. To this end, I would like to briefly contextualize the scope of its use and comment that:

Durante la primera mitad del siglo XVII siguió siendo una técnica relativamente rara practicada por algunos de los mejores maestros capitalinos para mecenas cultos, pero en el siglo XVIII casi no hubo artista que no pintara sobre cobre¹³.

(During the first half of the 17th century, it continued to be a fairly rare technique, practised by some of the best masters in the capital for cultured patrons, but in the 18th century there was hardly a single artist who didn't paint on copper)

¹³ BARGELLINI, C., *La pintura sobre lámina en los virreinos de la Nueva España y del Perú*, Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, UNAM, 1999, p. 81.

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Taking this statement at face value, then the date at which our work was produced (1673) puts it at a transitional period, between the rare early versions and the almost production line later ones in the 18th century. So, then, who was it that immortalized the face of the “Tenth Muse”? Was it “one of the best masters in the capital for a cultured patron”? Was it an anonymous nun initiated in the art of painting? Or was it, perhaps, Sor Juana herself, executing a self-portrait?

Before plunging headlong into the sea of possibilities that lie ahead, it is worth noting that, in the absence of specific documentation providing conclusive details about the artist or the context in which this exceptional work of art was carried out, what we will be putting forward shortly are a number of theories which, though they have not yet been proved, we find to be perfectly credible. With the intention, then, in these lines, of flying the banner of methodological rigor, and with the ultimate aim of upholding the genuine and previously unpublished nature of this portrait, I would like to support the proposed hypothesis, beyond the empirical evidence provided by the material preservation of the work being studied, drawing on previous research, which I will address in strict chronological order, in as far as:

Unos afirman que ese primer retrato es un autorretrato y que luego servirá de inspiración a los retratos posteriores y póstumos más famosos; otros afirman que ese autorretrato no existe pero que sí Sor Juana fue pintada en vida aunque nadie sabe o puede afirmar ni quién la pintó ni dónde está ese retrato¹⁴.

(Some claim that this first portrait is a self-portrait and that it then served as inspiration for more famous subsequent and posthumous portraits; others claim that that self-portrait does not exist, but that Sor Juana was indeed painted during her lifetime, although nobody knows, nor can they confirm, who painted her or where that portrait is.)

¹⁴ ROSA, S., *El reflejo, el eco. Sor Juana a través del pincel*, Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad de Montevideo, 2010, p. 4.

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Keeping the above statement clearly in mind, I now propose to turn to the first written reference mentioning or suggesting the existence of a portrait painted during Sor Juana's life, and which we find in her own writing. There are various verses of poetry that either implicitly or explicitly announce the existence of a pictorial depiction of herself, and which scholars versed in literary interpretation have attempted to decipher and publish. Of these, it is worth highlighting a poem that, without suggesting any self-portraiture, does seem to point to the existence of that putative first portrait, both in the title: *Décimas que acompañaron un retrato enviado a una persona*, (*Ten-line stanzas that accompanied a portrait sent to a person*), and in the body of said poem:

*A tus manos me traslada
la que mi original es,
que aunque copiada la ves,
no la verás retratada:
en mí toda forma transformada,
te da de su amor la palma;
y no te admire la calma
y silencio que hay en mí, pues mi
original por ti
pienso que está más sin alma.*

[...]

*En signo más venturoso
estrella más oportuna
me asiste sin duda alguna,
pues que, de un pincel nacida,
tuve ser con menos vida,
pero con mejor fortuna.*

[...]

aun pintada

[...]

She, who is my original
has forwarded me to you,
and although you see her drawn,
you will never see her withdrawn;
completely transformed in me,
she hands you the conquest: her love
do not wonder at the calm
and silence you find in me:
my original, for your sake,
I believe has lost her soul

[...]

a far more advantageous sign,
a far more favorable star,
for I was born of a paintbrush,
and had less life in my being
than she, but much more good fortune

[...]

although painted

[...]

you are the soul of this body,

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*De este cuerpo eres alma
y eres cuerpo de esta sombra*¹⁵

and the body of this shadow¹⁶

This same analytical tool has been used by those who, examining a line contained in Decima 126, “*este retrato que ha hecho copiar mi mano*” (*this portrait that my hand has drawn*)¹⁷, have posited the execution of a self-portrait carried out by the writer and (for some) talented painter.

Respecting the timeline as our discursive backbone, we should now turn to address the words with which the Jesuit Diego Calleja, considered the nun’s first biographer, accompanied Book III of the 1700 Madrid edition of *Fama y obras póstumas* (*Fame and Posthumous Works*), the following lines of which are relevant to us here¹⁸ (Fig. 9):

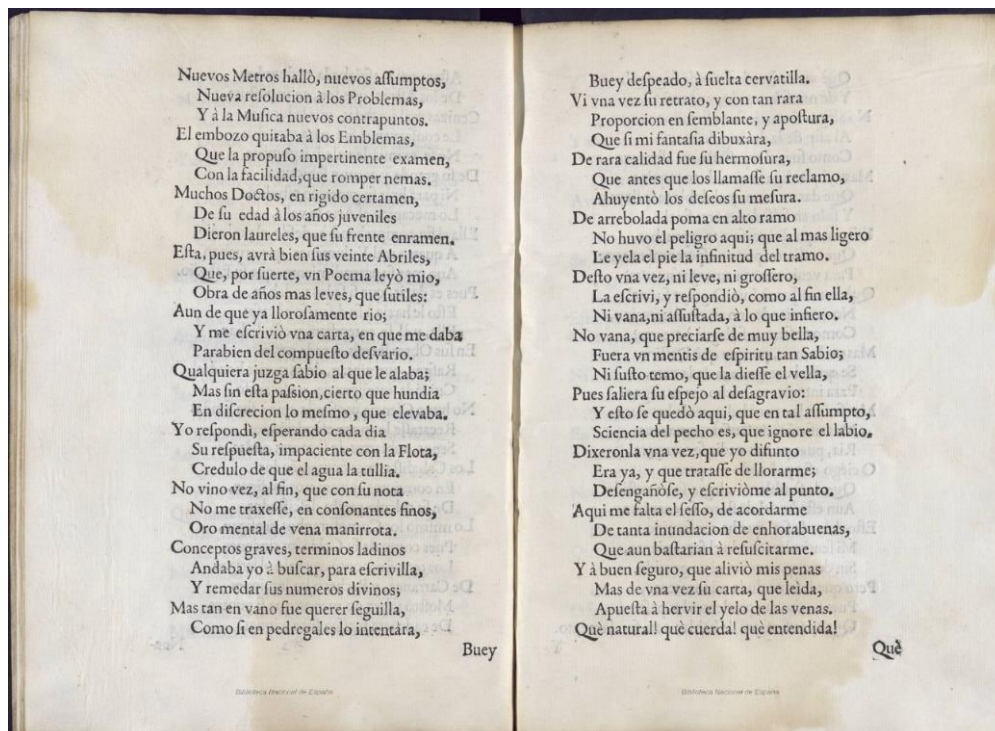


Fig. 9: Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz, *Fame and Posthumous Works*, Madrid, n.p., 1700, BNE.

¹⁵ SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ, “Décima 102” in *Décimas que acompañaron un retrato enviado a una persona*, Tomo II, 1692, BNE.

¹⁶ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Selected Works, trans. Edith Grossman. Norton Critical Editions, 2015

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ CALLEJA, D., ed. SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ, *Fama y obras póstumas*, Madrid, n.p., 1700, BNE.

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*Vi una vez su retrato, y con tan rara
Proporción en semblante, y apostura,
Que si mi fantasía dibuxára,
De rara calidad fue su hermosura,
Que antes que los llamase su reclamo,
Ahuyentó los deseos su medida.
De arrebolada poma en alto ramo
No hubo el peligro aquí; que al mas ligero
Le y ella el pie la infinitud del tramo.
Desto vna vez, ni leve, ni grossero,
La escrivi, y respondió, como al fin ella,
Ni vana, ni asustada, á lo que infiero.
No vana, que preciarse de muy bella,
Fuera vn mentís de espíritu tan Sabio;
Ni susto temo, que la diesse el vella,
Pues saliera fu espejo al desagravio:
Y esto Fe quedó aquí, que en tal asumpto,
Sciencia del pecho es, que ignore el labio
Dixerónla vna vez, que yo difunto
Era ya, y que tratase de llorarne;
Desengañófe, y escribióme al punto.
Aquí me falta el feífo, discordarme
De tanta inundación de enhorabuenas,
Que aun bailarían á resucitarme.
Y á buen seguro, que alivió mis penas
Mas de vna vez fu carta, que leída,
Apuesta á hervir el yelo de las venas.
Qué natural! qué cuerda! qué entendida!”¹⁹*

¹⁹ I once saw her portrait, and with such rare, proportion in her face and posture, as if of my fantasy drawn, of rare quality was her beauty, that before desires laid claim to it, her restraint banished them. Of reddened apple in uppermost branch. There was no danger here. Etc etc...the rest doesn't mention the portrait.

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From the content of this epistolary relationship between the Jesuit and the Mexican poet we can conclude, without any real grounds for doubt, that there was, indeed, at least one portrait of Sor Juana that could serve as a model for the illustration of the printed edition of the *Segundo volumen de las obras de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (2nd Volume of the Works of Sor Juana de la Cruz), and which was engraved by Lucas Valdés in 1692.²⁰

We now take a major leap forward in time, all the way to 1934, to examine the work of Abreu Gómez in which, drawing on the research of González Obregón, Nervo and A. Chávez from decades earlier, he set out to study, synthesize and provide new information on the study of Sor Juana portraiture, commenting:

El primero, en orden cronológico [...] es el pintado por ella misma. No se tienen noticias de su paradero. Tal vez no sea, precisamente, el primero. Pudo haber sido retratada antes por algún pintor – acaso en la Corte del Virrey Conde de Paredes, cuando la fama de la poetisa estaba hecha [...]”²¹

The first, in chronological order [...] was the one she painted herself. We do not know its whereabouts. It may not exactly be the first. She may have been painted earlier by some painter, even at the Court of the Viceroy the Count of Paredes, when the poet had already won her fame [...]

Continuing in the same vein, he adds that: “*We know of the one she is said to have painted of herself through the lithograph published in Tome II of the work Hombres ilustres mexicanos (Illustrious Mexican Men), by Eduardo L. Gallo. A copy of it was purchased in Puebla in 1883 by Mr. Robert H. Lambron*”²² (Figs. 10 and 11).

²⁰ ROSA, S., 2010, p.10.

²¹ ABREU, *Iconografía de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, Anales del Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía, Tome I, 1934, Mexico p.170.

²² *Ibidem*, p.170.

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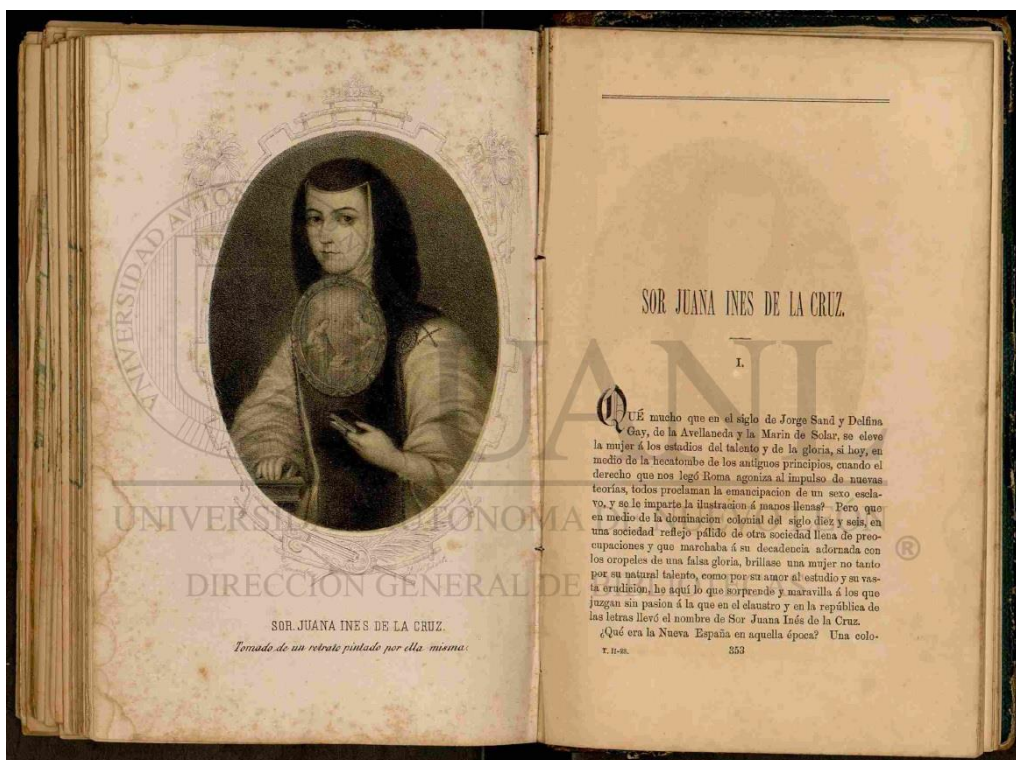


Fig. 10: Anonymous, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, lithograph, published in ALTAMIRANO, I.M., *Hombres ilustres mexicanos: biografías de los personajes notables desde antes de la conquista hasta nuestros días*, Tome 2 , Mexico, 1874.

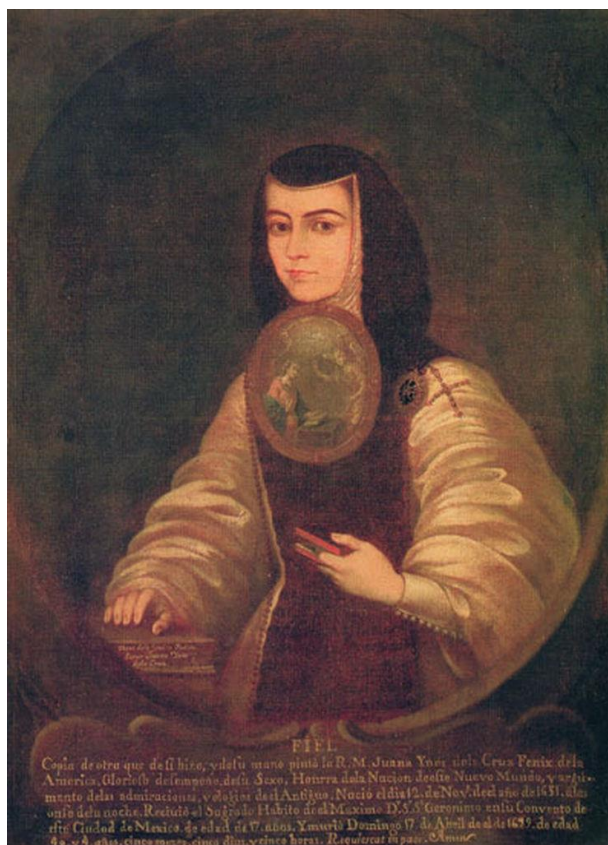


Fig. 11: Nicolás Enríquez de Vargas, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, oil on canvas, 18th century, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

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Diametrically opposed to this position is De la Maza who, supporting the hypothesis of there being an original portrait serving as a source for Valdés the engraver²³, comments that “*what we can categorically refute in spite of everything, is the existence of a self-portrait*”²⁴ going on to explain:

*Nada de esto nos dicen sus antiguos biógrafos. El padre Calleja, el primero, su amigo y consultor, aún puede afirmarse que lo niega implícitamente con su silencio al respecto. Calleja, tan acucioso en elogiar a la monja en todas las facultades que poseyó, [...] de pintura, ni una palabra*²⁵

Her old biographers tell us nothing about this. One could even argue that the first of these, Father Calleja, her friend and guide, denies it, implicitly, by his silence in this regard. Calleja, so keen to praise the nun in all the gifts she possessed, [...] about painting, not a word.

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And, he concludes: “*¿Es creíble – precisa preguntarse- que quien elogia sus conocimientos musicales y hasta se admira del esmero en la costura callara la insólita e importante facultad de pintar en una mujer y en aquella época?*”²⁷(Is it credible, we must surely wonder, that one who praises her musical knowledge and

²³ DE LA MAZA, F., 1952, pp.1-5.

²⁴ Ibidem, p.4.

²⁵ Ibidem, p.5.

²⁶ Ibidem, p.5.

²⁷ Ibidem, p.5.

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even admires her needlework skills, should say nothing about so great a gift as painting in a woman, and especially one of that era?)

Continuing with our bibliographic round-up, it is absolutely key we turn our attention to one of the main scholars of Sor Juana, Octavio Paz, whose thoughts on the subject included: “*Los retratos que tenemos de Sor Juana son copias de otros, destruidos o perdidos, que fueron pintados mientras vivía*”²⁸ (The portraits we have of Sor Juana are copies of others, destroyed or lost, that were painted while she lived). He does, however, entirely agree with De la Maza when it comes to rejecting any artistic skills on the part of the Mexican poet.²⁹

Of the scholars intent on shedding light on the possible existence of a *true portrait* of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, I think it fundamental to highlight the Mexican author Guillermo Schmidhuber de la Mora, who has devoted a large part of his professional life to the illustrious poet, and to whom we owe a number of major discoveries regarding her biography³⁰ and her *reflection through the paintbrush*³¹. In 2012 he published *Identificación del nombre del pintor del retrato de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz en Filadelfia*, a research project thanks to which, in collaboration with the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and subsequent to the meticulous cleaning and study of the canvas, it was possible to “*leer en parte de la voluta izquierda el minúsculo nombre del pintor escrito en forma vertical: Nicolás Enríquez*” (read in part of the left-hand volute the miniscule name of the painter, written vertically: Nicolás Enríquez), an 18th-century Mexican painter. Furthermore, the lower section of the canvas is taken up by a cartouche in which we read: “*Fiel copia de otra que de sí hizo y de su mano pintó la R.M. Juana Inés de la Cruz Fénix de la América [...]*”³²

²⁸ PAZ, O., 2003, p. 304.

²⁹ SCHMIDHUBER DE LA MORA, G., *Identificación del nombre del pintor del retrato de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz de Filadelfia*, Universidad de Guadalajara, eHumanista 22, 2012, p. 472.

³⁰ At this point I would recommend reading SCHMIDHUBER DE LA MORA, G., *Pertinencia de la biografía de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, [online], *Estudios de Historia de España* 19 (2017). Available at: <http://bibliotecadigital.uca.edu.ar/repositorio/revistas/pertinencia-actual-biografia-sor-juana.pdf>

³¹ ROSA, S., 2010, Title: *Reflejo a través del pincel*

³² DE LA MAZA, F., 1952, p.9.

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(Faithful copy of another that was painted of herself and by the hand of R.M [Reverend Mother] Juana Inés de la Cruz, Phoenix of the Americas [...]). I think it is fundamental to bring this piece of data to bear at this point in our research because, beyond constituting *per se* fundamental information for the study of the iconography of Sor Juana, it also draws attention to the conceited nature of a certain group of literati who, casting prudence to one side, wield their pens with an arrogance that is hardly recommendable and certainly not scientific. This minor brushing down is aimed at the *modus scribendi* of De la Maza who, in response to insinuations that the Philadelphia work might be a copy of a putative self-portrait, comments:

¿Quién inventó semejante impostura? Todo nace de un tardío retrato de Sor Juana, anónimo y sin fecha, que existe hoy en el Museo de Arte de Filadelfia [...] Se trata de una pintura que, si no del siglo XIX, es de fines del siglo XVIII –la técnica relamida y casi académica; las letras de la inscripción; la actitud poseur y hasta desafiante de la monja; la composición artificiosa, todo, nos fuerza a afirmar que esa pinturita no puede ser copia de un autorretrato³³.

“Whoever came up with this absurd nonsense? It’s all based on a late portrait of Sor Juana, anonymous and undated, preserved today at the Museum of Art in Philadelphia [...] This is a painting which, if not from the 19th century, is from the late 18th century. The affected and almost academicist technique; the letters of the inscription; the nun’s body language, posy and almost defiant; the artificial composition. It all leads us to conclude that this little picture cannot be a copy of a self-portrait.”

Beyond the fact that he made a mistake in dating the painting, something that History of Art specialists can of course be guilty of, the real crux of the matter here, other than the underlying disrespect in these and the lines following this paragraph,

³³ Ibidem.

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is the confidence with which he states facts proven by no more than his own will and a few unrevised clues. I am fundamentally referring, and here he is hardly the only one voicing the desire for this excessively fictionalized and romanticized interpretation of the life and works of Sor Juana to be seen for what it is, to her relationship with the Countess of Paredes and the conclusions drawn from reading Diego Calleja's biography: "*De estos versos del padre Calleja se desprende que, al ver un retrato de Sor Juana – llevado a España, con seguridad, por la Condesa de Paredes-*"³⁴ (From these lines written by Father Calleja we can deduce that, on seeing a portrait of Sor Juana – doubtless taken to Spain by the Countess of Paredes"). I am surprised by the confidence with which he refers to something which, today, and even more so when he was writing, is little more than a completely unsupported hypothesis. It is as such, though with far greater prudence, and drawing on previous bibliographic sources, that Schmidhuber writes:

*¿Habría alguien llevado su retrato a España, acaso la condesa de Paredes al comprender que nunca volvería a ver a sor Juana? ¿Fue ése el único retrato de sor Juana que fue pintado durante su vida? Claro que no sería un lienzo de gran formato con una cartela laudatoria, sino, uno que, por decoro, pudiera describirse como miniatura*³⁵

"Might someone have taken her portrait to Spain, perhaps the Countess of Paredes, on realizing that she would never see Sor Juana again? Was that the only portrait of Sor Juana painted during her lifetime? Of course it would not have been a large-scale canvas with a laudatory cartouche, but one which, out of decorum, one might describe as a miniature."

Having come thus far, and flying the same banner of methodological exigency I demand of others, I would not be so bold as to deny the existence of a possible

³⁴ DE LA MAZA, F, 1952, p.4.

³⁵ SCHMIDHUBER DE LA MORA, G., 2012, p. 473.

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portrait (perhaps self-portrait) given by Sor Juana to her friend the Countess of Paredes, but what I would do is to lower the tone of such a claim and raise doubts in its wake, while positing a new version of the story, fundamentally based (though not solely) on the material preservation of the portrait we are presenting here, and which, I believe, may have been brought to Spain by Antonio de Toledo y Salazar, Viceroy of New Spain, 2nd Marquis of Mancera and patron to Sor Juana Inés (Fig. 12). This conclusion is founded on the dating



Fig. 12: Anonymous, portrait of the *Marquis of Mancera*, oil on canvas, 17th century.

of the work to 1673, the same year the Marquis and Marchioness of Mancera lost their position at the Mexican Court. This hypothesis makes sense if we consider the close friendship and patronage between the nun and the viceroy and vicereine. After Sor Juana became lady-in-waiting to Leonor de Carreto at the viceregal Court in 1665, the two began to become close, something clearly demonstrated in the literary works dedicated to the Marchioness and which only the death of her dear *Laura* (as Sor Juana liked to refer to her in her poetry) could end. With this friendship having overcome the cloistered conditions by which Sor Juana's life was restricted, probably in part thanks to the privileges enjoyed by the power of the vicereine, it is no great leap to imagine the possibility of this previously unpublished miniature responding to Sor Juana's desire to give the marchioness a keepsake with which to remember her on being informed of her (and her husband's) forced return to Spain. The dates, at least, do not dare deny it. And yet the copper could not have reached Spain by the hand of the marchioness, given she died in Veracruz, once she had already set sail, alongside the Marquis, on her

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return journey to the “old country”. It would, therefore, have been the Marquis who took charge, in a two-fold tribute to both his and, above all, his wife’s great friend, of delivering the portrait of the much-admired learned nun to the capital of the Kingdom.

This hypothesis is supported (or not rebuffed) by the documented relations between the proto-biographer Diego de Calleja and the Marquis of Mancera, confirmed source in the 1692 and 1700 editions: “*Aquí referiré con certitud no disputable [tanta Fe se debe al testigo] un suceso [que] el señor marqués de mancera [...] me ha contado dos veces*”³⁶. (“Here I shall relate with undisputed certainty [such Faith is due to the witness] an event [that] the Marquis of Mancera [...] has told me twice.”). However, there is no definitive trace of the relationship between the Countess of Paredes and the Jesuit, so we cannot attribute Sor Juana’s second great female friend with having taken to Madrid the portrait that Calleja claimed to have seen in said city where, on the other hand, this portrait has survived which, by its date of execution, it would seem quite reasonable to assume to have been the property of her predecessor in the viceroyalty. It is thus that Beatriz Colombi, in her study of the relationship between Calleja and Sor Juana, writes:

Así, hace una generosa mención al marqués de Mancera y a su esposa, Leonor Carreto, muerta en Nueva España, quien, según sus palabras, no “podía vivir un instante sin su Juana Inés”, pero ninguna alusión a los marqueses de la Laguna, quienes habían sido tan decisivos en la publicación y publicidad de la escritora en España.

As such, he makes a generous mention of the Marquis of Mancera and his wife, Leonor Carreto, who died in New Spain and who, in his own words “could not live for an instant without her Juana Inés”, but there is no mention of the Marquis and Marchioness of La Laguna, who had been so decisive in the

³⁶ *Aprobación del reverendísimo Padre diego Calleja de la Compañía de Jesús o Vida de Sor Juana*, facsimile edition, in *Sor Juana, Fama y obras póstumas, facsimile of the Seville edition (1692)*, UNAM, 1995, pp. 21-22.

*Este silencio respecto de sus mecenas más destacados suscita interrogantes.*³⁷

publication and publicity of the writer in Spain. This omission regarding her most prominent patrons raises questions

Finally, the fact that Sor Juana should take pains to reply to the observations Calleja made regarding the portrait seen in Madrid, and not deny it and, indeed, allow an engraving “done in Madrid by Lucas Valdés”³⁸ to be included in the 1692 edition, provides us one further argument supporting the theory we are putting forward here. (Fig. 13)

Everything suggested *ut supra*, while demonstrating the existence of at least one portrait painted of the poet during her life, does nothing to clarify its authorship. As such, various hypotheses may be considered although, for the time being, they are not entirely refutable. Firstly, we could posit the authorship of this portrait as a commission made of a Court painter both at the suggestion and expense of the vicereine herself, given I suspect it would have been difficult for an outside painter and a cloister nun to have entered into contractual agreement. Would said commission have reflected the vicereine’s desire to take a timeless souvenir of her



Fig. 13: Lucas Valdés, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, engraving, 1692, published in *SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ, Décimas que acompañaron un retrato enviado a una persona, Tome II, 1692, BNE.*

³⁷ COLOMBI, B., *Diego Calleja y la vida de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, Revista Exlibris, No.7, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2018, p. 33.

³⁸ DE LA MAZA, F., 1952., p.1.

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closest confidante and friend away with her? If that version of events fails to convince the reader, perhaps we should also consider the possibility of the portrait being painted within the walls of the convent of the Order of Jerome. Unable as I am to speculate on the likelihood of it being a self-portrait, I would still cast a modicum of doubt here, given if it were her own work, surely the inscription ought to be in the first person, that is to say *Ætatis mea 25*” rather than “*Ætatis sua 25*”? Finally, there is the possibility that, at the poet’s behest, the portrait was painted by a fellow nun, with the intention of its being given to her great friend, the Vicereine Leonor de Carreto, having received news of the latter’s departure. What does seem certain is that “*las mujeres también se dedicaron a ella [la pintura], [women did devote themselves to it (painting)]*”³⁹ and:

*El que no la conozcamos no es prueba de su inexistencia, pues las mujeres acostumbraban generalmente en el anonimato. Sin embargo, pueden mencionarse algunas obras ciertamente hechas por mujeres, como las pinturas en los libros conventuales*⁴⁰

The fact we do not know of it does not mean it did not exist, as women tended to work anonymously. However, a number of works definitely painted by women could be mentioned, such as the paintings in monastic books

Further supporting this argument, I quote an article by Fernando Samaniego from the newspaper *El País* in February 2005, reviewing the exhibition *Monjas coronadas* (*Crowned Nuns*) from the permanent collection of the Museo Nacional del Virreinato, in Mexico: “*Los retratos son anónimos, realizados en talleres, y otros pintados por monjas en el interior de los conventos, sobre todo en el momento de la muerte*”⁴¹ (The portraits are anonymous, executed in workshops, and others painted by nuns inside their convents, especially at time of death). Saying that, I would not make any bold statements, given the evidence is thin on the ground

³⁹ MURIEL, J., *Cultura femenina novohispana*, UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 2000. p. 489.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 489.

⁴¹ I quote from: https://elpais.com/diario/2005/02/28/cultura/1109545206_850215.html

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here, and I would invite readers to weigh up the varying theories and come out in favour of whichever one entertains them most.

Before concluding our study, I would like to mention Gómez Abreu's suggestion "*de tres retratos - los dos primeros perdidos hasta hoy - se derivan las principales copias y reproducciones que se conocen*"⁴² (of three portraits – the two first ones since lost – which are the source of the major known copies and reproductions) as this hypothesis could be supported by the idea I will now put forward. Looking through the iconography of Sor Juana, I think it particularly interesting to turn to the compositions depicted in the nun's badges she is portrayed with, as they give an insight into that original dual representation. To date, almost all known portraits with nun's badges depict the scene of the Annunciation, as is the case with the Philadelphia version and other subsequent ones by Herrera, Miranda and Cabrera (Fig. 14). However, in the engraving published in 1692 in Seville to accompany the poet's work, and I refer back to the previous paragraph, "based on a drawing done in Madrid by *Lucas Valdés*"⁴³, the nun bears a medallion with an image of a Virgin (probably and Child), matching the medallion in the portrait we are addressing here and which, it would appear, Calleja claims to have seen in Madrid.



Fig. 14: Fray Miguel Herrera, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, oil on canvas, 18th century, Colección Banco Nacional de México.

In brief, and to conclude, I would put forward the following proposal to

⁴² ABREU GÓMEZ, E., 1934, p.170 .

⁴³ DE LA MAZA, F., 1952, p.1.

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future researchers, reinforcing the versions suggested to date, and positing the existence of two portraits painted during the lifetime of the “Tenth Muse”. One, lost since centuries past, which may have been the source for the posthumous Philadelphia, Miranda and Cabrera portraits, among others, where the nun’s badge depicts the Annunciation, and another, being revealed today, probably brought to Spain by the 2nd Marquis of Mancera, and which served as inspiration for the edition of works by the Mexican poet published in Seville in 1692, where the medallion depicts a Virgin.

Let these lines finally help to place the *vera efigie* of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in the place this extraordinary female mind deserves in History’s visual memory.

Sofía Fernández Lázaro



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