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Unidentified artist

(New Spain (Mexico), 17th century)

*A First Portrait of Sor Juana
Inés de la Cruz*

1673

oil on copper

inscribed (upper left): *Ætatis sua 25*

11.5 x 9 cm.; 4 1/2 x 3 1/2 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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“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.”¹

This previously unpublished portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz undoubtedly stands as the only known preserved work painted of the poet during her lifetime, and in all likelihood the one to which so much research, and so many theories about Sor Juana, have alluded, in the search for the real face of the most celebrated representative of New Spanish literature.²

The Latin inscription *Ætatis sua 25*,³ which we can read in the upper left-hand corner of the copper, confirms that this work was painted during the early adulthood of the “Tenth Muse” and allows us, taking her birth as occurring on 12 November 1648, to date the execution of this extraordinary historical/artistic narrative to 1673, a seminal year in the life of the poet.⁴

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 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

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portraits of nuns to which we are accustomed, 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.⁵

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

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, 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 honour 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 medallion: a protective symbol of the brides of Christ, with a pictorial depiction of the Virgin and Child, surrounded by four religious figures for whom the professed nun felt great devotion.

Having analyzed the compositional aspect of the work, we should now turn to its travel itinerary; assuming that the portrait of Sor Juana was painted in Mexico City, how did it end up in Spain? The researcher Guillermo Schmidhuber addressed this issue in his work *Identificación del nombre del pintor del retrato de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz de Filadelfia* when he asked: "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".⁶

In the absence of either documentation or historical indications that would affirm the version asserting the likelihood of the Countess of Paredes (1649 – 1729) having brought the physical souvenir of her great friend with her, I will now set out, fundamentally based (though not solely) on the material preservation of the work we are presenting here, a new hypothesis arguing that the portrait which serves as the source for so many depictions of the poet and nun (figs. 1 and 2) may have been brought to Spain by Antonio de Toledo y Salazar (1622 – 1715), Viceroy of New Spain, 2nd Marquis of Mancera and patron of Sor Juana Inés. This conclusion is founded on the dating 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

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Juana became lady-in-waiting to Leonor de Carreto (1616 – 1673) 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 their 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.

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Figure 1. Lucas Valdés, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, 1692, engraving

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Figure 2. Miguel Cabrera, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, 18th century, oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Historia, Mexico

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Footnotes

¹ S. Rosa, *El reflejo, el eco. Sor Juana a través del pincel*, Montevideo 2010, p. 4.

² The mystery surrounding the iconography of the most distinguished of Mexican nuns has been approached by a significant group of scholars, among which a few names stand out: L. González Obregón, *México Viejo*, Mexico 1979; A. Nervo, *Juana de Asbaje*, Madrid 1910; E. Chávez, *Ensayo de psicología de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, Barcelona 1931; E. Abreu Gómez, 'Iconografía de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz', in *Anales del Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía. Quinta Epoca*, vol. 1, no. 8, Mexico 1934; O. Paz, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe*, Mexico 2000.

³ 'At her age of 25'.

⁴ For a long time, Sor Juana Inés was wrongfully believed to have been born in the year 1651 due to the lack of reliable documentation (Georgina Sabat-Rivers and Alejandro Soriano Vallés, among others). However, the documents discovered by Guillermo Schmidhuber in 2016 confirm that, in line with the theories of authors like Octavio Paz and Antonio Alatorre, 1648 is the correct year of her birth (G. Schmidhuber de la Mora, 'Pertinencia actual de la primera biografía de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz', in *Estudios de Historia de España*, vol. XIX, 2017).

⁵ On portraits of nuns, see J. Muriel & M. Romero de Terreros, *Retratos de monjas*, Mexico 1952; A. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, Mexico 1999; R. Ruiz Gomar, *El retrato novohispano en el siglo XVIII*, Puebla 2000; I. Mendoza Villafuerte, *Estudio de la producción novohispana de monjas muertas*, Puebla 2003.

⁶ G. Schmidhuber de la Mora, *Identificación del nombre del pintor del retrato de Sor Juana Inés de la cruz de Filadelfia*, Guadalajara 2012, p. 473.