There has long been speculation that the great Mexican poet, nun, and scholar Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648/51–1695) was a painter as well as a writer. The inscription on an eighteenth-century portrait of Sor Juana by Nicolás Enríquez (active ca. 1730–87), now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, identifies the portrait as “a copy after another by her own hand,” and it has often been noted that a large number of her courtly poems refer to portraiture and/or the art of painting. However, no work of art has ever been attributed to the hand of Sor Juana, and, consequently, the literary tradition that she was a painter has often been seen by scholars as pure romance. On the other hand, some prominent historians have supported aspects of the theory. This paper suggests that Sor Juana’s long-

1 Marcus Burke discusses the known early portraits of Sor Juana and their possible sources at some length in *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries*, ex. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), 355. For a more comprehensive discussion, see Nina M. Scott, “Imágenes de Sor Juana” and Aureliano Tapia Méndez, “El autorretrato y los retratos de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” both in *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y el pensamiento novohispano* (Toluca, México: Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura, 1995), 425–31 and 433–64, respectively.

2 In 1980 the art historian Francisco de la Maza stated that he believed that the Countess of Paredes, Vicereine of New Spain, must have carried a miniature portrait of Sor Juana back to Spain where it served as a model for the engraved portraits that were used as frontispieces for her first two collections of poems. In 1990 Marcus Burke reiterated the possibility, describing the work as a lost self-portrait (Burke, *Mexico*, 356).
lost artistic oeuvre might have belonged to the realm of small-scale painting. Although this idea is not new, it has never been explored in depth. Sor Juana’s possible activities as a miniature painter will be viewed here through the three lenses — the court, convent, and scholar’s study — that comprised her social and intellectual worlds.

Building on foundational studies in early modern women’s history and literature, scholars have worked for the past twenty-five years to understand the events of Sor Juana’s final years, her identity as a Creole, and most especially, how she managed to create exceptional work as an artist and an intellectual in an oppressively patriarchal society. Piece by piece, scholars have teased out an understanding of how Sor Juana constructed a metaphorical and real “space” that allowed her agency for her creative work. This process has both accompanied and resulted in a deconstruction of mythologies about the poet that date back to the seventeenth century. This study of Sor Juana and painting explores the genesis of iconic portraits that played a role in her enshrinement as a canonical figure of genius and proposes the poet’s own agency in their creation. In its study of the Marian iconography and institutional use of the miniature paintings worn by Sor Juana and her community, this paper adds to recent scholarship that focuses on Sor Juana’s religiosity and her relationship to other religious women. And, in revisiting the question of her literal engagement with the

his 1982 biography of Sor Juana, Octavio Paz suggested that Sor Juana could have been the creator of the supposed self-portrait and other works as well. See Octavio Paz, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz or the Traps of Faith, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 56. Tapia Méndez’s “El autorretrato” is the most useful recent discussion of the self-portrait question.

3 An earlier version of this paper, “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Miniature Painter?” was presented at a session sponsored by the Association for Latin American Art at the Annual Conference of the College Art Association held in Atlanta in 2005. I thank my session chair Stacie Widdifield and discussant Emily Umberger for their encouragement and suggestions. I also deeply appreciate the improvements suggested by the anonymous readers of this article. Except where noted otherwise, the translations (and any errors) are my own.

4 Creole, English for Criollo: a person of Spanish descent born in the Americas.
art of painting, it seeks to point out yet one more field of complexity, multiple meaning, and intertextuality in her work and world view.  

A famous portrait of the poet attributed (with controversy) to the Mexican artist Juan de Miranda (active ca. 1680-after 1714) and dated (with controversy) to the year 1713 can serve as a point of entry to this study (Figure 1). A now-missing inscription on the painting, recorded at an earlier date, informs us that Mother María Gertrudis de San Eustaquio, Sor Juana’s “spiritual daughter” and bursar of the convent, commissioned this painting, or another very like it, for display in the accounting office of the San Jerónimo convent. Portraits of women in New Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were rare commissions, let alone full-length, life-size portraits. This painting, as the art historian Marcus Burke has noted, represents Sor Juana through conventions usually reserved to depict male intellectuals and prelates of high status and authority. The iconography is virtually unknown in early modern female portraiture. In this full-length portrait, Sor Juana is represented as a poet, scholar, and intellectual. Surrounded by her books and scientific equipment, including prominently a clock, glass vial, and mathematical formula, with quill in hand, she pauses in her work to gaze out intensely at the viewer. She wears the large escudo de monja, or nun’s badge, adopted by many of the convents of New Spain. Other than her religious habit and its large escudo depicting the Virgin of the Annunciation, nothing, not even a gesture, testifies to an interior life of religious devotion. She touches the large rosary that she wears, but is clearly engaged in study, not prayer. The books represented in her library are largely religious, but they are theological rather than devotional in nature. There are none of the usual topoi of sanctity: no devotional reading interrupted, no holy image tacked to the wall, no crucifix, skull, or other vanitas symbol (the clock seems more of a mechanical than symbolic wonder). She writes, but no heavenly cherub guides her

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6 Burke, Mexico, 355.
Figure 1. Attributed to Juan de Miranda, *Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. Oil on canvas, ca. 1713. Height 73¾ in. (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México, D.F.)
hand, nor does holy light shine down upon the page. She has just added her signature beneath an unpublished poem. For a representation of a professed nun, the absence of devotional imagery in this portrait is stunning.

Unique as it is as a visual representation of an early modern woman, the Miranda portrait is remarkably in line with the verbal self-portrait that Sor Juana herself gives us through her own writings. Although its grand size and laudatory inscription would not have been appropriate to that earlier time or circumstance, the image itself is a representation that Sor Juana — before her 1694 renunciation of worldliness — might have prized. The painting is clearly inscribed “Miranda fecit” (“Miranda made it”), and the circumstances of its commission are somewhat reliably documented. However, its unique iconography could have been based on an earlier model — and possibly even a self-portrait from the poet’s own hand. One is reminded of the manner in which Sor Juana inserted her own voice/body/self in masterful intellectual engagement with powerful male literary or theological authorities — her literary “self-inscription” into traditional (male) discourses. Perhaps it was Sor Juana herself who first conceptualized this audacious visual inscription of a woman into the (male) scholar’s study. The existence of an earlier model from Sor Juana’s bold and original mind would help to make this extraordinary representation from a little-known and relatively undistinguished artist less bewilderingly singular.

Although no paintings have been identified as the work of Sor Juana, there are abundant references in her poetry to painting, miniature painting, and the act of self-representation. These references range from the depiction of Sor Juana as a scholar or writer, to her own self-portraits and self-references in her poetry. For example, in her poem “El autorretrato,” she writes about the act of creating a self-portrait, and in her epistles, she often refers to the act of writing as a form of self-representation.

7 There exists another group of at least three eighteenth-century portraits that do represent a sense of Sor Juana’s interior devotional life. In these portraits the poet is depicted against a plain background; she holds her index finger inside a very small book and looks out at the viewer, giving the impression that she has been interrupted in the midst of devotional reading. See Tapia Méndez, “El autorretrato,” 433–64.

8 Sor Juana’s various methods of asserting her own subjectivity and voice into male tradition is the subject of much contemporary scholarship. See Frederick Luciani, Literary Self-Fashioning in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), and Ryan Prendergast, “Constructing an Icon: The Self-Referentiality and Framing of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies 7.2 (2007): 28–56.

9 Scholars are not even certain whether the artist was Juan or José de Miranda or whether there were one or two paintings of Sor Juana by this “Miranda.” See Burke, Mexico, 355, and Tapia Méndez, “El autorretrato,” 442–53.
in particular. In her poems, Sor Juana explores all of the artful conceits that can be woven around image, copy, brush and pen, likeness and longing: she compares her subject and herself to portraits, addresses portraits, speaks in the voice of a portrait come to life, and meditates on life and death through portraiture and painting. In the Miranda portrait she is shown writing a sonnet on the theme of hope; the poem inscribed in the painting reads in part:

Green rapture of human life,
Crazy hope, golden folly,
[...]
Those who with green panes for glasses
See all things painted to their desire;
And I, more measured in my fortune,
Hold in two hands my eyes,
And see only what I touch.¹⁰

This poem is pure Sor Juana: the profession of allegiance to an emergent scientific discourse wrapped in a Baroque conceit on the vanity of art. But it is more: as literary critics have shown us, Sor Juana’s work is always layered with multiple meanings, often strongly visual in nature. Virginia M. Bouvier has suggested that the green color of the glasses refers to the emblem of the Holy Office (the Green Cross).¹¹ Frederick Luciani has noted that the images of spectacles and eye-embedded hands likely derive from Sor Juana’s extensive study of emblematic literature.¹² Perhaps more than anything else, it is this image-saturated poetry that has kept alive the tradition of Sor Juana as painter. That, and inscriptions, such as the already-discussed legend on the Philadelphia portrait, have kept the speculation alive. In the inscription on the Miranda portrait, the artist tells us

¹⁰ As translated by Pamela Kirk in her Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Religion, Art, and Feminism (New York: Continuum, 1998), 158.
¹² Luciani, Literary Self-Fashioning, 128.
that Sor Juana, the Tenth Muse, was skilled in “all the arts” (my emphasis). What are we to make of this extraordinary claim?

Miniature Painting and the World of the Court

As a young woman, Sor Juana came to the attention of the viceregal court through her display of multiple and exceptional talents. She served as a lady-in-waiting and favorite of the Vicereine Leonor Carreto, Marquise of Mancera (1635–1674), for five years before entering the convent in 1669. During her years at court, Doña Juana Ramírez de Asbaje captured enormous attention. In 1668 the viceroy arranged for the spectacle of no less than forty scholars to question the then twenty-year-old girl on virtually every field of knowledge. As the favored protégée of the viceregal couple, Sor Juana herself later referred to the “instruction” and study she undertook at the court. 13 What would have been the proper course of study for such a young lady? In his widely-influential Book of the Courtier (1528), Baldassare Castiglione prescribed the ideal education of the courtly gentlewoman, stating that she was to be instructed in letters, music, and painting. 14 Literary evidence documents Sor Juana’s skill in music, and her prowess in letters became legendary; instruction in drawing and small-scale painting would not have been neglected in the training of this supremely gifted young woman.

Sor Juana would have painted in oil on card or metal, as was traditional for small-scale painting in Spain and Italy. 15 Small paintings were easily transported as gifts and mementos between European courts; they were displayed in special cabinets and incorporated into jewelry. It was a mainstream art form: all of the major artists of the Spanish court—Juan Pantoja de la Cruz (1553–1608), Alonso Sánchez Coello (1531–1588), and Diego Velázquez (1599–1660)—made small-scale portraits in

13 She referred to “instruction” in the so-called Monterrey letter. Quoted in Paz, *Sor Juana*, 500.


addition to large-scale ones. Small-scale painting required less space, supplies, and time to practice than full-scale painting and was therefore particularly well suited to the non-professional pursuits of the gentleman or lady of the court.

In a period when women artists were exceedingly rare, a number of early modern women emerged as both important portrait painters and ladies of the court. Levina Teerlic (ca. 1510–1576), Caterina van Hemessen (ca. 1527–1566), and Sofonisba Anguissola (ca. 1532–1625) all served as gentlewomen of royal households and all practiced small-scale painting. Like Sor Juana, most of these women were also skilled in music. The distinction and accomplishment of such courtly women were widely celebrated. Anguissola in particular, cultured and well educated in the humanist tradition, spent eighteen years at the Spanish court as court painter and lady-in-waiting to Isabel de Valois (1544–1568), the third wife of Philip II (1527–1598) and the daughter of Catherine de’ Medici (1519–1589). Anguissola taught painting to the queen and produced portraits of the royal family and visitors to the court. She became famous in her own lifetime as a prodigy and “miracle of nature.”

Anguissola was not considered a prodigy simply for being a portraitist, which was seen as an appropriate art form for a lady, but for practicing that art with the skill of a man. From antiquity women had been held to have a natural capacity for portraiture (ritrarre), an art form defined as merely copying what was seen in nature and not involving the intellect. Ritrarre required only hand-eye coordination and was tied to colore (color), while imitare, the province of men, required intellectual judgment and was associated with disegno (design). In imitare imperfect nature is reshaped by

16 M. Carmen Espinosa Martín, Iluminaciones, pequeños retratos y miniaturas en la Fundación Lázaro Galdiano (Madrid: Fundación Lázaro Galdiano, 1999), 68.
the artist in accordance with a concept of perfection (or ideal beauty). Sor Juana would have been conversant with these theories through her reading of painting manuals and other treatises on art. Sofonisba Anguissola was the only woman the biographer Giorgio Vasari credited with the capacity to create life-like animated portraits; alone among women she was able to capture the secret “movements of the soul,” in the words of Leonardo da Vinci.  

The art historian Mary Garrard has traced how Anguissola, like Sor Juana, consciously constructed a space and a persona that enabled her to work seriously as an artist while retaining the status and respect of a courtly lady.

Sofonisba Anguissola had left the Spanish court only thirty years before Leonor Carreto (d. 1674), the future Mexican vicereine and Sor Juana’s first important patron, arrived to take her own turn as a lady-in-waiting. Carreto first served the Infanta María Teresa of Spain (1638–1683), who later became the wife of Louis XIV (1638–1715), and subsequently became the favorite of Mariana of Austria (1634–1696), second wife of Philip IV (1605–1665). Carreto was present for all of the pomp and spectacle of this famous Baroque court and witnessed the creation of the masterpieces of its court painter, Diego Velázquez. Later, in Mexico, Leonor Carreto, then the Marquise of Mancera, would have been well aware of the potential fame of the young Creole prodigy whom she “discovered” and brought to serve at her own glittering court.

No miniature paintings are securely attributed to the Mexican court from any time period, let alone paintings that can be attributed to Sor Juana. However, the fact that none of these small, portable paintings have

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been identified does not automatically signify their non-existence. Art historical study of early modern oil miniatures is in its infancy; the noted art historian Suzanne Stratton has characterized the field as “vastly understudied” with “no adequate published catalogs.” Furthermore, study of the art from the Mexican viceregal courts is also complicated, because the viceroys only served for short periods and then returned to Spain, along with their retinues and personal art objects. Despite the lack of evidence, the art of the miniature, securely documented as important in Spain and clearly associated with culture of women, was not likely to have been overlooked by the viceregal court of the Marquis and Marquise of Mancera, which was said to have rivaled or even outshone the splendor of Madrid.

A courtly art related to miniature painting and securely documented as practiced in both Spain and Mexico was pintura — poetry, songs, and plays about painted portraits. An aspect of the wider Renaissance interest in paragone — artful comparison between the arts or between art and nature — pintura was a frequent game of early modern Spanish courtiers,

24 In light of this absence, a recent major exhibition on Latin American portraits stated that “Miniature portraits . . . entered the viceregal Latin American art repertoire in the later part of the eighteenth century” and associated the genre with the advent of independence from Spain rather than Renaissance court culture. See Retratos: 2,000 Years of Latin American Portraits, ex. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 157. I believe this is a mistaken interpretation.

25 Stratten, Spanish Golden Age, 14.

26 In addition, no artists worked exclusively for the viceregal court, and, most importantly, the viceregal palace does not survive as it was in the colonial period, with its art collections even partially intact. Because of all of these conditions, studies of viceregal imagery at this point have only limited fine art objects to discuss. For example, Rodriguez Moya’s recent study, La mirada del virrey, analyzes documents describing ephemeral displays of power (such as ceremonial entrances), two sets of series of portraits of the viceroys, and a biombo depicting the Royal Palace in the seventeenth century. See Rodriguez Moya, La mirada del virrey: iconografía del poder en la Nueva España (Castelló de la Plana: Universitat Jaume I, 2003).


including the ladies of the court.²⁹ Described as the “sister arts,” the relationship between poetry and painting dated back to the classical world and Horace’s dictum *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry). Sor Juana’s enthusiastic participation in the courtly art of *pintura* is clearly attested by her numerous surviving portrait poems (sixteen such poems have been identified).³⁰

If we accept that it was likely that Sor Juana had been trained in miniature painting to some extent at the viceregal court, then it is clear that the subject, from an early age, would have been of more than abstract interest to her. The act of painting involves a visceral experience of philosophical and poetic abstractions; aspiring artists are always dismayed by the distance between their artistry and that of nature. In Sor Juana’s numerous *pinturas* the narrator runs the entire gamut of emotions elucidated by artistic effort — from joy and elation to darkness and despair. She is about to bring a painting into being; she is in the act of painting; she is giving up on the attempt as an impossible task; she is disappointed by a finished portrait (most frequently); she is elated by a finished portrait (once). It is, of course, a metaphor for the struggle inherent in all types of creative or intellectual creation. All of the stages and moods of an actual artist’s relationship with artistic practice are present in her poems, not merely the expected insufficiency of art in the face of nature of the poetic conceit.

For the Renaissance and Baroque artist, the tradition of *ut pictura poesis* was a tool to enhance the status of art as a liberal rather than a mechanical art. At the same time art had to defend itself against Protestant charges of idolatry. In response, artists developed a theoretical apparatus designed to advance the status and human dignity of visual art and its practitioners. The literature of art disseminated in painters’ manuals and treatises was grounded in a theology of painting and made the foundations of Baroque philosophical abstraction — the Neoplatonic and emblematic

²⁹ Davies, “Pintura,” 308.

worldview — concrete and real. The distinction between *riterre* and *imitatio* in art gave Sor Juana a framework to speak about the nature of the difference in intellect between men and women and was a mark against which Sor Juana could measure her own efforts. There were a host of advantages to the portrait poem as art form in Sor Juana’s circumstances: it was a traditional courtly form, well adapted to expressions of flattery and love, and it allowed satire and play with expectations of gender and sexuality. The portrait poems addressed the issues that mattered most to her: intellectual and artistic creativity — its sources, struggles, and limitations — and most importantly, her right to its practice. In the same way that Sor Juana’s poems are noted for their multivalency, the reasons for her preference for the theme of *pintura* must have been similarly layered and complex.

Two of her portrait poems unambiguously attest to Sor Juana as a painter in brush and pigments rather than as a metaphorical painter of words. The poems, Décima 126, “Accompanying a ring bearing the portrait of the Señora Countess of Paredes. She explains,” and 127, “On the same subject,” were written to accompany a gift of a miniature painting to the Vicereine María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, Countess of Paredes, who, like Leonor Carreto, became a beloved friend and patron of Sor Juana during the years she spent in Mexico (1680–1688). The initial lines of the poem Sor Juana sent with the miniature explain its unworthiness, stating that

>This copy that is your semblance  
>Was by tenderness inspired,  
>Whereon a clumsy hand conspired  
>To give emotion utterance. . . .

Both poems strongly critique the artistry of the enclosed portrait-gift: the miniature was painted with “clumsy hand” and “faulty brush.” Such rhetoric of abasement seems in accordance with proper courtly etiquette if Sor

31 Discussed in Paz, *Sor Juana*, 232.  
32 As quoted in Paz, *Sor Juana*, 232.  
Juana were indeed the artist and rather inexplicable if she were not. Other of Sor Juana's pinturas paint head-to-toe portraits of the beloved or reflect poignantly on the gap between the artificial stasis of the painted portrait and the fleeting life of its subject. A justly famous example laments the “colorful deceit” of the courtly art of miniature painting, which is, in the end, “artifice, [...] foolish labor, [...] cadaver, ashes, shadow, void.”

In her five years as a highly cultured protégée of the viceregal court, miniature painting would have been a foundational element of Sor Juana's world, both as poetic metaphor and a gentlewoman's practice.

**Miniature Painting and the Convent**

When Juana Ramírez de Asbaje moved from the court to the convent she entered another early modern institution closely associated with small-scale painting. Both convents and monasteries have long been associated with traditions of manuscript illumination and miniature painting; the word miniature itself derives from minium, the Latin word for the red lead pigment used for initials in medieval manuscripts.

But in the Mexican convents such production and patronage were not limited to the illumination of books of profession or choir books. The convents of New Spain developed a new genre of devotional art in the form of small-scale paintings and embroideries worn by the nuns as part of their habits. These badges, created by many of the leading artists of New Spain, were called escudos de monjas (shields of nuns) and can be seen in all painted portraits of Sor Juana.

The first escudos de monjas had appeared in the Mexican convents in the 1630s in response to reforms imposed on the convents by the Spanish...

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Archbishop of Mexico, Francisco Manso y Zúñiga (1587–1655). Although the Carmelite convent of San José that Sor Juana initially entered before moving to San Jerónimo was reformed (it was the order famously reformed by St. Teresa of Ávila), the majority of Mexican convents were, and would remain, luxurious institutions.\textsuperscript{37} The oldest and most elite convents in New Spain were those of the Conceptionist Order. The most visible sign of their reform would be a change in the appearance of the nuns themselves, who, since their founding in Spain at the end of the fifteenth century had been required to wear \textit{veneras} (religious jewelry) with an image of the Virgin Mary on their chest (and as an embroidered badge on the sleeve of their cape).\textsuperscript{38}

In his 1635 Mexican edition of the Conceptionist rule, Manso y Zúñiga imposed mild reform on the convents in the symbolic realm of dress. The bishop reminded the nuns of their vows of enclosure, chastity, obedience, and poverty, the interpretation of which was most troubling to all. He then directly addressed the issue of their Marian badges, stating that the nuns were now required

\begin{quote}
[to] wear on their cape and scapular an image of Our Lady, surrounded by the rays of the sun and wearing a crown of stars on the head, in a setting that is plain and decorous, which is not to be of gold, stone, or enamel.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

The original (Spanish) rules of the order had not specified anything about the material of the images, and the nuns in Spain and the Americas had, in fact, been wearing \textit{veneras} of precious materials.\textsuperscript{40}

It was precisely at this time, in the 1630s, that the Mexican Conceptionist nuns began to wear small paintings on copper or parchment set into frames of indigenous tortoiseshell in the place of their traditional

\textsuperscript{37} For an overview of convent history in Mexico, see Asunción Lavrin, \textit{Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
\textsuperscript{38} Perry, “Escudos,” 50–51, 56
\textsuperscript{39} Francisco Manso y Zúñiga, \textit{Reglas y ordenaciones de las religiosas de la Limpia e Inmaculada Concepcion de la Virgen} (México, 1635), 5.
\textsuperscript{40} Perry, “Escudos,” 75.
veneras of enameled gold. The new form of the badges fulfilled all of the requirements of the Bishop’s rule: they were images of the Virgin that were not made with “gold, stone, or enamel.” The new art form was a direct response to the restrictions imposed on the convents by the bishop, but it was a response on the part of the convents that obeyed the letter of the rule more than its spirit. The new tortoiseshell-framed paintings were as much luxury objects as the veneras had ever been.

In the seventeenth century, the use of the escudo de monjas was confined to the Conceptionist Order and to three convents that had been founded by the Conceptionists: the Jeronymite convent of San Jerónimo in Mexico City that would become Sor Juana’s home (founded 1585); a second Jeronymite convent, also called San Jerónimo, that was founded by the Mexican convent but located in the city of Puebla (founded ca. 1600); and the Augustinian convent of San Lorenzo, also founded by San Jerónimo in Mexico and also located in Mexico City (1598). With the exception of the Conceptionists, none of these convents in Europe had a prior tradition of wearing devotional imagery and the rules of both the Jeronymite and the Augustinian Orders specifically proscribed the use of ornaments of any kind. Therefore, the initial use of the escudo de monjas represented an informal kind of “family” practice, sometimes in direct defiance of the rules of their order, on the part of certain convents that were related — to the Mexican Conceptionist convents and to each other — by their foundations.

The practice was from the start firmly linked to the reform issue. Although convents of Jeronymite and Augustinian nuns founded by Mexican Conceptionists also adopted the new practice, reformed convents founded by them never did. For example, the Conceptionists also

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41 Perry, “Escudos,” 75–78.
43 On the Mexican rules of the Jeronymite Order, see Regla, y constituciones que han de guardar Las Religiosas del Convento del Glorioso Padre San Gerónimo de la ciudad de Los Angeles (Puebla: Seminario Palafoxiano, 1773), 130. On the rules of the Augustinian Order, see Regla dada por nuestro padre San Augustin a sus monjas . . . ampliados por el Illmo. Señor Doctor D. Manuel Fernandez de Santa Cruz (Puebla, 1753).
founded San José, the first Carmelite convent in New Spain, in 1616, but escudos de monjas were never adopted by the Carmelites. And when Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz (1637–1699) founded the reformed Augustinian convent of Santa Mónica in Puebla in 1688, those reformed nuns also shunned the escudo, even though the Agustinas in Mexico City (the Convento de San Lorenzo) were already wearing the escudo de monjas. In the eighteenth century, as the convents’ battle with the bishops over unwanted reform reached a fever pitch, virtually all of the unreformed convents of the metropolitan center of New Spain (Mexico City and Puebla) were wearing the escudo de monjas — regardless of traditional practices or foundations.44

Already by the time Sor Juana entered the convent of San Jerónimo in 1669, the church hierarchy had developed concerns about the suitability of the escudos de monjas. Following a pastoral visitation in 1673, Archbishop Payo Enrique de Ribera (1622–1684), soon also to assume the post of viceroy, castigated the nuns of San Jerónimo for the excess of their dress, and issued pronouncements concerning the prohibition of colored ribbons, lace that was worn on cloths around the head “under the pretext of illness,” lace worn on sleeves, colored underskirts, or other vanities. Furthermore, the bishop reprimanded the nuns to “take care that in your escudos that you should wear you do not exceed in preciousness or curiosity the holy poverty that you profess.”45 Indeed, the escudos de monjas no longer seemed the product of a reform; the curiously oversized shields were, rather, the epitome of worldly preciousness and pride.

The evidence available suggests that in the seventeenth century, the nuns of San Jerónimo wore the same type of escudos de monjas as the other convents — round medallions displaying the image of the Virgin (usually of the Immaculate Conception) surrounded by angels and saints and encircled by a decorative border.46 The only known exception to this is Sor

44 The escudos and the convent reform issue are discussed in detail in Perry, “Escudos,” 174–94.
46 No escudos depicting the Annunciation are known to date from before the eighteenth century. The only known escudo that can be associated with the Jeronymite order
Juana herself, who is shown in her portraits as wearing an oval rather than round *escudo*, which depicted the Virgin Annunciate rather than the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. As represented in portraiture, her *escudo* did not depict the usual array of angels and saints surrounding the Virgin; this more simple type of *escudo* appears to have been an alternate type, existing from the beginning of the genre (as were embroidered *escudos*).\(^{47}\)

A striking example of a typical *escudo* with Annunciation imagery is in the collection of the Hispanic Society of America (Figure 2). This oval *escudo*, signed “José de Paez *fecit*” and dating to the later eighteenth century, depicts a crowd of heavenly figures and saints, including Saint Jerome at the upper right, surrounding the central image of the kneeling Virgin and the Angel Gabriel. *Escudos* with this iconography, often including Saint Jerome, have long been associated with the Jeronymite convents, although there does not seem to be any link between the Annunciation itself and the Jeronymite convents’ institutional identity. However, the theme does appear to have been strongly linked to the interior life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and this is suggestive as to the origins of the Annunciation iconography in Jeronymite *escudos*.

Much recent scholarly work has aimed at an understanding of Sor Juana’s religious thought and work. Between 1676 and 1692 she composed a series of *villancicos*, carols set to music and performed as part of Church liturgy; of these, two series, on the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, focus on the Virgin Mary. In the *villancicos*, Sor Juana celebrates the Virgin’s intelligent participation in God’s plan for redemption, which is achieved paradoxically through her great humility:\(^{48}\)

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\(^{47}\) I do not know of any *escudo* that looks exactly like Sor Juana’s as seen in portraiture, that is, of the Annunciation but without any supporting saints. But very few *escudos* representing the Annunciation are known.

Figure 2. José de Paez, *The Annunciation and Saints*. Oil on copper, ca. 1753–90. 8⅜ × 6⅜ in. (framed). (Hispanic Society of America, New York City)
The Sovereign doctor
Of Divine Schools
From whom all the angels

Acquire their wisdom,
Since she is the one in whom
The intelligence of God
Better participates
She is assumed
In order to read the supreme
Theology Lectureship. 49

Numerous scholars have pointed out Sor Juana’s identification with Mary; in The Answer to Sor Filotea, Sor Juana revealed that she would have liked to have become a theologian, if such were possible for her, which of course it was not because she was a woman, although she asserts it was possible for Mary.

The Annunciation, which is traditionally understood as the moment of Christ’s Incarnation, became of great importance to Sor Juana. The Virgin of the Annunciation is traditionally depicted as reading a book, which is associated with Holy Scripture, the Word of God, which in Mary became flesh. Sor Juana felt great devotion to the Virgin Mary as the vessel for the Incarnation of the Divine Word, seeing this moment of transformation as that which allowed all women permission for intellectual and creative activity. In Exercises on the Incarnation (1685/6), a series of spiritual exercises focusing on the Creation, the theologian Pamela Kirk has pointed out that Sor Juana expanded the idea of Mary as the Mother of God — present at the beginning of time — to the concept of Mary as the Mother of All Things. Kirk also notes that throughout the second of three poems she wrote on the Incarnation, Sor Juana repeatedly used the feminine word “Palabra” in the place of the usual masculine “Verbo” to express the Incarnation. 50 For Sor Juana, the Divine Word, the central mystery of life, was feminine. The Annunciation and Incarnation were significant to

49 Quoted in Cortés-Vélez, 183.
50 Kirk, Sor Juana, 57–59.
all nuns, yet deeply specific to Sor Juana, who honored the Virgin as the “Mother of the Word.”\textsuperscript{51} As the visual expression of these liberating ideas, the Annunciation was an ideal emblem for Sor Juana as a poet, scholar, and nun.

The comparison between Sor Juana’s escudo de monja and an emblem is an apt one. Emblems brought together the artistic and the literary to create visual signs representing invisible, abstract values and ideas. Sor Juana’s interest in emblems was even more acute than the average scholar in New Spain, a society deeply immersed in emblematic language.\textsuperscript{52} In 1680 she designed the entire program of emblems for one of two triumphal arches erected to greet the new viceroy, Tomás Antonio de la Cerda. This was a prestigious commission; the very public arch was accompanied by a book-length publication explicating its program of images.\textsuperscript{53} The arch was the work of a scholar highly skilled in both word and image.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, versed in miniature painting at the viceroyal court, could well have designed and painted her own escudo de monja with its new and distinctive iconography so important to her. There are no known Annunciation escudos predating her death in 1695.\textsuperscript{54} An escudo was not just a painting, even an emblematic painting, but was a badge of institutional (not personal) identity.\textsuperscript{55} Therefore, the “emblem” we are considering was the sign of the Incarnation of God through the Holy Virgin as worn on the body of a Mexican nun struggling to assert her right to use her God-given talent for intellectual and creative work. Furthermore, since the

\textsuperscript{51} Kirk, Sor Juana, 72, refers to her Exercises on the Incarnation, and p. 153, includes a masterful analysis of the Miranda and Cabrera portraits. Sor Juana also referred to Mary as “the Mother of the Word” in her Reply to Sor Filotea: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, The Answer/La Respuesta, Including a Selection of Poems, trans. Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell (New York: The Feminist Press of The City University of New York, 1994), 38.

\textsuperscript{52} For an overview of the importance of emblematic imagery in New Spain, see José Pascual Buxó, Juegos de ingenio y agudeza: la pintura emblemática de la Nueva España (México, D.F.: Banamex, 1994).

\textsuperscript{53} Paz, Sor Juana, 155–79, and Kirk, Sor Juana, 28.

\textsuperscript{54} Nine of the 132 painted escudos known to me depict the Annunciation. See the checklist in Perry, “Escudos,” 280–540.

\textsuperscript{55} See Perry, “Escudos,” 147–52, for a discussion of the iconography of the escudos de monjas as evidence of their function as institutional rather than personal badges.
convent of San Jerónimo operated a school for girls, the subject matter of the Virgin at prayer (reading) as a paradigm of divine wisdom was indeed fitting as a badge of community identity. Sor Juana could have created this emblem for her escudo at any point following her admission to the convent in 1669, but it fits best in the period after she began developing her ideas of the Virgin as “Doctor of Theology” in the villancicos of 1676–1692 and is particularly compelling in the context of her struggles with the male clergy of Mexico in the 1690s.

Members of the convent of San Jerónimo also began to wear badges of the Annunciation after Sor Juana’s death in 1695. Based on a study of eight portraits of Mexican Jeronymite nuns (other than Sor Juana) and 145 escudos de monjas, it appears that the nuns of her convent began to wear escudos with Annunciation imagery in the eighteenth century. The evidence is admittedly scant, but also suggestive. The Jeronymite nuns in nearby Puebla do not appear to have adopted the practice, only the Jeronymites of Mexico City (Sor Juana’s convent). Furthermore, three of the nine known painted Annunciation escudos depict nuns wearing escudos, and these are the only known escudos de monjas to display such self-referential iconography. By the eighteenth century the use of the escudos de monjas by the Creole convents had taken on a decidedly political tone, and the Jeronymite Annunciation escudos appear to be a subset within that larger context.

Perhaps these escudos were worn as a form of homage to Sor Juana and the convent itself, in the same way that Miranda’s large portrait of Sor Juana was commissioned by and for the women of her convent. Several escudos set into silver monstrance-like frames or enclosed in decorative

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56 For the portraits, see Josefina Muriel de la Torre and Manuel Romero de Terreros, Retratos de monjas (México, D.F.: Editorial Jus, 1952), and Alma Montero Alarcón, Monjas coronadas: Profesión y muerte en Hispanoamérica (México, D.F.: Museo Nacional del Virreinato, 2008).

57 I know of 145 painted and embroidered escudos de monjas: 132 painted, 13 embroidered, plus 11 more embroidered ones that appear to be shoulder badges. Five of these apparent badges are of St. Jerome.

58 All three of these escudos are reproduced in Virginia Armella de Aspe, Escudos de monjas novohispanas (México, D.F.: Grupo Gusta, 1993), 157, 168, and 179.
boxes with inscriptions testify to the fact that the convents did at times honor or memorialize individual nuns through their escudos, although these examples do not appear to have been from Jeronymite convents. In thinking about the convents’ agency in creating powerful emblems of their history, one may consider again the Miranda portrait. Aside from the question of authorship, the imagery was clearly subversive of the power of the male hierarchy over the convent, for it grandly and “publicly” reinstated Sor Juana in her scholar’s study in memoriam and perhaps even aimed a dart at the Inquisition in the unpublished poem that it reproduced. The notion of the convent audaciously embracing escudos de monjas featuring the Annunciation—which could have been both impeccably orthodox and delightfully subversive—does not appear a stretch.

There is an interesting and related coda to this discussion of Sor Juana’s escudo. In the early 1990s, during a renovation of the ex-convent of San Jerónimo, a grave containing bones and a large oval escudo were discovered. This was taken to be the remains of Sor Juana, although other scholars found this identification unlikely. The escudo de monja was in very poor condition with the image completely abraded from its copper plate. At the time, Margarita López Portillo (1914–2006), the sister of a former president of Mexico, was in charge of the ex-convent, which had become a cultural center. She took possession of the escudo, bringing it home for, as she later explained, “safekeeping.” During the 1995 celebrations surrounding the commemoration of the 300th anniversary of Sor Juana’s death, the theft became a public scandal. The Mexican poet Homero Aridjis

59 Two escudos are known to have been set into monstrance-like silver frames, enabling the images to be venerated from a distance. One of these is in a private collection, location unknown, and the other is at the Museo Nacional del Virreinato in Tepotzotlán, An escudo of the Virgin of Guadalupe that had belonged to Sor María de la Encarnación, who professed at the Dominican convent of Santa Rosa in Puebla in 1776, is within a box covered in red velvet; the inside cover displays an ink drawing of flowers, birds, and a mask, and an inscription outlining the life of Sor María (Private collection, Mexico).

60 The discoveries are discussed in María Teresa Jaén, “El Exconvento de San Jerónimo: Lugar de entierro de monjas,” in *La “América abundante” de Sor Juana* (México, D.F.: Museo Nacional del Virreinato/INAH, 1995) 38, 44–52. I’d like to thank Dr. Nina M. Scott for this citation.
described López Portillo’s act yet another abuse of power on the part of the ruling elite and called the discovery of the escudo the equivalent of “finding Dante’s quill or Shakespeare’s ruffled collar.” The affair culminated in the Mexican Congress publicly requesting the return of the escudo to the Mexican people. At the ceremony celebrating its return, López Portillo presented the highly contested and ruined escudo, swaddled in a bed of lace and linen like some precious relic, to the directors at the ex-convent (Figure 3). The highly contested and ruined escudo is presented to view like some precious relic, swaddled in its bed of lace and linen. The New York Times took a somewhat less reverent tone in its attempt to explain the escudo de monja, dryly characterizing it as “an oval-shaped metal disk about the size of a Kaiser roll.” Kaiser roll or not, the subject of Sor Juana’s escudo has long been a subject of great interest among scholars. The new

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evidence concerning escudos of the Annunciation strongly suggests Sor Juana’s artistic involvement with this innovative form of miniature painting developed by the convents of New Spain.

Miniature Painting and the Scholar’s Study

Scholars, poets, and lovers of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz have long speculated on the fragments of evidence suggesting that she may have been a painter. The connections between small-scale painting, women, and court culture are well known, and those between painting and the convent as clear as the escudo de monja around her neck. But there is a third context for Sor Juana’s life and work, and it also has a place for the small-scale painter. This context is that of the scholar’s studio, and perhaps more than the court or the convent it was where Sor Juana’s heart lay.

A 1750 portrait (Figure 4) of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz by Miguel Cabrera (1695?–1768) is based, at least in part, on the Miranda portrait. Sor Juana is represented seated and turning a page of a large open book of the writings of Saint Jerome. Like Miranda, Cabrera has been careful to lovingly detail Sor Juana’s library. Among the rows of learned books in the library both Miranda and Cabrera imagine for Sor Juana is a volume representing the works of the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher (1601/2–1680). Kircher’s lavishly-illustrated encyclopedic texts celebrated optics, mechanics, natural history, ancient civilizations, and hieroglyphics—all through the lens of Jesuit universalism. Far from the modest volumes depicted in the paintings, Kircher’s works were available in Mexico as oversized volumes, a kind of portable cabinet of curiosities. They would have joined the emblem books on her shelves, whose images the scholar José Pascual Buxó has identified as specific sources in her writing.

It is not difficult to imagine Sor Juana poring over these illustrated volumes in

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63 Buxó has shown that specific emblems from Diego de Saavedra Fajardo’s Idea de un príncipe político cristiano representada por cien empresas inspired the verbal imagery in the opening lines of First Dream. See José Pascual Buxó, “Sor Juana and Luis de Góngora: The Poetics of Imitatio,” in Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 379–81.
Figure 4. Miguel Cabrera, Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Oil on canvas, 1750. 81½ x 58¼ in. (Museo Nacional de Historia, México, D.F.)
her study, which the historian Paula Findlen has characterized as a kind of *wunderkammer* in itself with its books, manuscripts, scientific paraphernalia, musical instruments, telescope, and countless unknown curiosities, including the feathered Aztec headdress that was a gift of the Countess of Paredes to the nun.\(^{64}\)

In both the Miranda and Cabrera portraits Sor Juana stares out at the viewer with an intense gaze as she holds her right arm in an outstretched position, turning the pages of a large book in the Cabrera portrait, writing with a quill in the Miranda. This is a classic pose of self-portraiture. Self-portraits are characterized by a focused gaze because the intense scrutiny of the working portrait artist is captured in the face portrayed, usually through the use of a mirror. To make a full-length self-portrait, Sor Juana would have needed to use some type of optical aid—a small convex mirror or a large flat mirror or a *camera obscura*. We know that such optical devices fascinated her, as they did Father Kircher (mirrors were considered optical devices in the period, commonly found in laboratories and *wunderkammern*).\(^{65}\) A lover of vision, light, and color, Sor Juana wrote lyrical poetry “suffused,” in the words of the literary scholar Emilie Bergmann, “with references to mirrors, lenses, [and] ‘magic lanterns’. . . .”\(^{66}\) The mechanics of creating a self-portrait would have interested her, in terms of the optical devices involved, the command of the laws of perspective required, even the chemical processes involved in the production and use of pigments and other painting materials. The very act of miniaturization was fraught with scholarly significance, as it moved between the micro and macrocosmic worlds so important to the Baroque imagination.

Looking back at the Cabrera portrait, we see that next to the works of Father Kircher, among the books of importance to Sor Juana, Cabrera has carefully placed both Francisco Pacheco’s 1649 treatise *Arte de pintura*


and a volume entitled *Gloria del pintor*. Bergmann has pointed out the intensely scientific nature of early modern painting treatises, such as Vicente Carducho’s *Diálogos de la pintura* (1633) in which the ideal artist is repeatedly described as “científico.” The materials used by the early modern painter — the minerals and ores that were the basis for pigments, and their process of preparation — were the same as those found in the alchemist’s laboratory. Painting, and miniature painting in particular, fit into Sor Juana’s Kircherian world’s scholarly fascination with optics, chemical and alchemical transformations of matter, mystical patterns such as the microcosmic, perspective and geometry, and devices of wonder. Portraiture delved into physiognomy and the nature of the soul. In a 1724 treatise, Spanish court painter and theorist Antonio Palomino wrote that “the face is the clock that reveals all our human emotions; it discloses the sex, the age, the intelligence, and the disturbances of the soul.”

If we return to the question of the source for the image of Sor Juana as a scholar in her study seen in the Miranda and Cabrera portraits, it is possible to propose, as discussed earlier, that Sor Juana herself may have been the source of the imagery. Small paintings of figures set in detailed interior spaces, such as Sor Juana in her library, were made throughout the early modern world. Portraits of scientists in particular — in the small-scale forms of miniatures or engravings — were exchanged as gifts and gathered in collections. An example of this genre is the engraved portrait of the acclaimed philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon (1591–1626) in his study that served as a frontispiece for his 1640 treatise *De augmentis*

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The portrait of a highly accomplished woman scholar would have possessed a similar cachet of rarity and curiosity. Recent scholarship on Sor Juana has stressed her agency in forging her public persona and her skillful manipulation of autobiographical writings, gifts, favors, and contacts to allow her to claim the space, time, and respect she required in order to

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71 Although widely influential, this text was published at Oxford and thus perhaps not available to Sor Juana; however, I am not making a claim for this particular image but for this type of portraiture. Sor Juana had a library of thousands of books and engaged in extensive correspondence, so similar portraits would have been known to her.

follow her interests.\textsuperscript{73} If a self-portrait—proudly and uniquely assertive of a formidable and intact female intellect—was in her possession at the time she renounced intellectual pursuit and worldly vanity, its relinquishment or destruction would have been considered a great and fitting act of symbolic significance.

More happily, such a painting may have existed, or may still exist in Spain or elsewhere. Her first biographer, Father Diego Calleja (1638–1725?) wrote that he saw a life portrait of Sor Juana in Spain, and a 1685 portrait of a Spanish intellectual and admirer of Sor Juana appears to have been based on the Miranda painting or its earlier model.\textsuperscript{74} Both events document the early existence of her portrait in Spain. Of course, any such portraits could have been destroyed, or simply lost forever, or never have existed. But especially if small and unframed, a painting on copper or vellum takes up very little space and could remain mixed in a box of family papers or stored in a dark cabinet or drawer, awaiting rediscovery.

Renowned as a wonder of the New World, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was acclaimed as the Tenth Muse, practitioner of all the arts. The world of miniature painting brought together her involvement in court culture, devotional art, metaphysics, alchemy, optics, and hieroglyphic signs and symbols. Her courtly poetry supports the claim that she practiced small-scale portrait painting. She was well versed in the visual language of emblems. We know that, as a nun, she wore a new type of devotional miniature of great personal significance, which was later worn by the nuns of her convent, perhaps in an act of homage. The inscription on her portrait in the Philadelphia Museum of Art clearly states that it was a copy after another image “by her hand.” Evidence pointing to painting as an aspect of Sor Juana’s lived reality has always been present in her writing and in the visual record. This article hopes to join others engaged in the process of

\textsuperscript{73} Paz refers to such “flattery and favors” as part of Sor Juana’s highly developed “political skills.” Paz, \textit{Sor Juana}, 191–92. See also Luciani, \textit{Literary Self-Fashioning}.

\textsuperscript{74} Tapia Méndez, “El autorretrato,” 452–53.
painting a larger picture of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a woman who was herself, in every way, anything but miniature.\footnote{I’d like to thank my Framingham State College colleagues Dr. Michael Wong-Russell for that final turn of phrase, and Jayne Haggard and Dr. Lynn Parker for their helpful suggestions.}