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Viceregal School, New Spain

Portrait of Sor María Trinidad de la Asunción as a Crowned Nun, 1767

VICEREGAL SCHOOL, NEW SPAIN

PORTRAIT OF SOR MARÍA TRINIDAD DE LA ASUNCIÓN AS A CROWNED NUN, 1767

Inscribed upper left: '*R^{o} de la M^{e} / Sor Maria Trinidad d^{e} la Asuncion / Profesó el dia 26 de May^{o} d^{e} 1767 / Edad de 19 A^{s} 1 Mes.*'

Oil on canvas
104 x 80 cm
41 x 31 ½ in.

Provenance

De Severino Sosa, Venezuela;
Thence by descent.

Comparative Literature

Muriel, J. and Romero de Terreros, M., *Retratos de monjas*, Mexico City, Editorial Jus, 1951;
Gonzalbo Aizpuru, P., *Las mujeres en la Nueva España. Educación y vida cotidiana*, Mexico City, El Colegio de México, 1987;
Heredia Moreno, C., "Origen y difusión de la iconografía del águila bicéfala en la platería religiosa española e hispanoamericana", *Archivo Español de Arte*, 274, 1996, pp. 183–194;
Monjas coronadas. Vida conventual femenina en Hispanoamérica, exh. cat., Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, 2003;
Hammer, K., "Monjas coronadas: The Crowned Nuns of Viceregal Mexico", in Benson, E. P. (ed.), *Retratos: 2,000 Years of Latin American Portraits*, exh. cat., New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2004;
Lavrin, A., *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008;
Montero Alarcón, A., *Monjas coronadas. Profesión y muerte en Hispanoamérica virreinal*, Mexico City, 2008;
Alonso Pérez, C., *Retratos de monjas profesas de conventos de la ciudad de Puebla, 1720–1821: un análisis iconográfico*, MA thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, 2011;
Córdova, J. M., *The Art of Professing in Bourbon Mexico: Crowned-Nun Portraits and Reform in the Convent*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2014;
Montero Alarcón, A. and Borja Gómez, J. H., *Muerte barroca. Retratos de monjas coronadas*, exh. cat., Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia, Bogotá, Banco de la República, 2016.


Rª de la Mª
Sor Maria Trinidad dª la Afuncion
Profesó el dia 26 de Mayº dº 1767
Edad de 19 Aº 1 Mes.

The sitter is shown at three-quarter length against a plain brown ground, her body frontal and her head turned slightly to the viewer's right, meeting the viewer's gaze. She wears the black veil of a professed choir nun, edged with strands of pearls and carrying a tab, or *lengüeta*, over the brow on which a gilt Marian monogram is set; small oval medallions and jewelled flowers are pinned in a row down its side. Beneath it a grey-white *toca* winds around her throat and frames the face. Across her breast lies a black yoke cut in the form of a cross, its four arms edged in red and white, strung with pearls. Its upper band is divided by pearl threads into three panels embroidered in silver with the instruments of the Passion. At the centre of the cross hangs an oval medallion in which a nun in a blue habit and black veil holds up a monstrance. On her head a gilt, jewelled imperial crown, its arches meeting under a small orb, is buried in flowers. In her right hand she carries the profession candle. Its shaft is set in a crown-shaped gilt pricket from which small chains hang, and beneath the pricket stands a silver double-headed eagle with wings spread, an oval medallion of the Sacred Heart, surmounted by its cross, set in its breast; below the eagle a bouquet of roses, carnations and jasmine is tied with blue and white ribbons. In her left hand, on whose fourth finger she wears a gold ring, she holds a crucifix with a gilt corpus together with the ribbon-wrapped stem of a second bouquet, which rests against her arm and carries a pale relief medallion, perhaps a wax *Agnus Dei*, and a small carved cherub's head at its summit. The face is modelled quietly, with strong brows, a long straight nose, a small closed mouth and a faint asymmetry between the two sides. Everything else is worked in tight, enamel-bright touches over the dark ground, so that pearls, medallions, embroidery and flowers register as an inventory of objects rather than as costume.

The inscription, in a neat upright letter that uses the long s of the period, expands to *Retrato de la Madre Sor María Trinidad de la Asunción, profesó el día 26 de mayo de 1767, edad de 19 años, 1 mes*: portrait of Mother Sor María Trinidad de la Asunción, professed on 26 May 1767, aged nineteen and one month. The date fixes her birth to about April 1748 and her solemn vows to a single day: the feast of St Philip Neri. The formula "*Madre Sor*" was standard on profession portraits of the time. What is unusual is what is left out of the inscription. The surviving Puebla and Mexico City examples almost always name the sitter's parents and her convent; this one gives her religious name, the date and her age, but nothing more.[1] Whether that reflects the smaller format, a family preference or a later re-lettering cannot now be determined. As it stands, the picture records one woman with notarial precision at the exact moment it converts her into a role.

[1] Carlos Alonso Pérez, *Retratos de monjas profesas de conventos de la ciudad de Puebla, 1720–1821: un análisis iconográfico*, MA thesis, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, 2011. Chapter 4 catalogues nineteen portraits with inscriptions, dimensions and collections.

Portraits of this kind, the *monjas coronadas*, were commissioned by the natal family to hang in the family house in place of a daughter they would rarely see again. The type took shape in New Spain in the seventeenth century, flourished through the eighteenth and survived into the nineteenth.[2] Living profession portraits of this sort are, in practice, a New Spanish phenomenon. The crowning of nuns was practised in Peru and the Nuevo Reino de Granada, but there it was largely reserved for notables of rank and for the moment of death. The great Bogotá series in the Banco de la República consists almost entirely of nuns laid out crowned upon their biers.[3]

The habit identifies her order as the Urbanist Poor Clares of New Spain. At first glance, it might appear to be that of a Conceptionist or Hieronymite nun, the two great "calzada" orders whose profession portraits dominate the surviving corpus (fig. 1); those, however, wore over the breast a large circular *escudo de monja*, a painted badge that was unique to them. Our sitter lacks such a marker. In its place is the black cross-shaped yoke, called the *yugo* or *palio*, worn over a blue tunic and mantle with a richly embroidered black veil. This same accoutrement appears in three Puebla portraits from the convent of Santa Clara, one of which, at Tepotzotlán, wears the black *yugo* embroidered with St Francis and St Clare, and another of which holds the crucifix and flowered palm in the left hand and the candle in the right, with the ring on the left ring finger, exactly as in our portrait.[4] It appears again in José de Alcíbar's great full-length of Sor María Ignacia de la Sangre de Cristo, who professed at Santa Clara in Mexico City on 1 May 1777 (fig. 2). The medallion at the centre of the yoke depicts St Clare of Assisi, a patron of the order, holding up a monstrance, the attribute that commemorates her defence of San Damiano with the Sacrament.

The Urbanist Poor Clares were, with the Conceptionists, the wealthiest and most worldly of the New Spanish orders, following the mitigated rule of Urban IV that permitted property and income and answering to the Franciscan provincials rather

[2] Josefina Muriel and Manuel Romero de Terreros, *Retratos de monjas*, Mexico City, 1951; Alma Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas. Profesión y muerte en Hispanoamérica virreinal*, Mexico City, 2008; James M. Córdova, *The Art of Professing in Bourbon Mexico: Crowned-Nun Portraits and Reform in the Convent*, Austin, 2014; Kirsten Hammer, "Monjas coronadas: The Crowned Nuns of Viceregal Mexico", in E. P. Benson (ed.), *Retratos: 2,000 Years of Latin American Portraits*, New Haven, 2004; *Monjas coronadas. Vida conventual femenina en Hispanoamérica*, exh. cat., Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, 2003, and Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid, 2005.

[3] The Colección de Arte del Banco de la República holds forty-six post-mortem crowned-nun portraits, the largest such holding anywhere, including ten Conceptionists and sixteen Poor Clares. Montero Alarcón 2008, pp. 14–15; Alonso Pérez 2011, p. 29; Alma Montero Alarcón and Jaime Humberto Borja Gómez, *Muerte barroca. Retratos de monjas coronadas*, exh. cat., Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia, Bogotá, Banco de la República, 2016.

[4] Alonso Pérez 2011, cat. nos. 11 (Sor Ana Josefa María de Jesús, Santa Clara, Puebla, half-length, signed *Castillo*), 12 (Sor María Paula de la Santísima Trinidad, Santa Clara, Puebla, professed 1797) and 13 (Sor María Juana del Señor San Rafael, Santa Clara, Puebla, professed 1810, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, 98 x 75 cm).

than the bishops.[5] The name "de la Santísima Trinidad" is attested among the Santa Clara professions in Puebla, and the closest comparison is a portrait of Madre Ana María de la Preciosa Sangre de Cristo, a Poor Clare of Santa Clara in Puebla, painted in 1770, just three years after ours, in the same three-quarter format with a similarly elaborate mantle, now at the Denver Art Museum (fig. 3).

The profession ceremony brought the community in procession with candles; the novice was called to be married to Christ, made her three vows, received the black veil, and was then given the ring, the flowered palm and the crown. The bouquets here represent the palm, the martyr's frond rethought as a *ramillete*; the ring is placed on her finger at the betrothal (a detail most painters of the genre omitted), and the crown is that of the bride of Christ and, by extension, an allusion to the Coronation of the Virgin. Its flowers have been read as further carrying an older, Indigenous inheritance of flower ritual alongside the Christian symbolism.[6] The pearls and medallions pinned across veil and yoke were in most cases lent for the day and returned afterwards, so that the painting preserves an appearance that lasted merely a few hours. A double-headed eagle carrying a medallion in its breast beneath a crown-form pricket is a documented form of Hispanic and Spanish American church silver, found on lecterns, monstrances and reliquaries, read variously as the Habsburg device, the eagle of St John, or an emblem of royal Eucharistic devotion.[7] The Sacred Heart it carries had been granted its own Mass and Office by Clement XIII only two years earlier, in 1765, and was the devotion above all others associated with the Society of Jesus.

The picture records the devotional setting of a very particular moment in the spring of 1767. The royal *pragmática* of 27 February expelling the Jesuits from Spain and the Indies was executed in the peninsula at the beginning of April and reached the American viceroyalties over the following summer, weeks after this profession. Entry to a house like Santa Clara was itself expensive and socially policed. A black-veiled choir nun brought a dowry of some three thousand pesos, roughly twice what a white-veiled sister required, and every candidate had to prove legitimate birth and *limpieza de sangre*.[8] Within two years of our nun's vows, Archbishop Lorenzana instigated his campaign to impose the austere *vida común* on the convents of his archdiocese, formalised in his pastoral letter of 6 December 1769. Bishop Fabián y Fuero was pressing the same reform in Puebla, where the *calzada* convents were in open resistance and the Poor Clares, under Franciscan rather than episcopal jurisdiction,

[5] Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Las mujeres en la Nueva España. Educación y vida cotidiana*, Mexico City, 1987, chapter on convents; Alonso Pérez 2011, pp. 17–18, on the *calzada* orders.
[6] Córdova 2014, chapter 4; on the rarity of the ring in the corpus, Alonso Pérez 2011, cat. no. 11.
[7] Carmen Heredia Moreno, "Origen y difusión de la iconografía del águila bicéfala en la platería religiosa española e hispanoamericana", *Archivo Español de Arte*, 274, 1996, pp. 183–194.
[8] Asunción Lavrin, *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico*, Stanford, 2008, chapters 1–2; Montero Alarcón 2008, p. 81, on the formal requirements for profession.

presented the reformers with a separate problem.[9] The display this canvas celebrates, with its lent jewels, embroidered mantle and personal ornament, is therefore exactly what the reform set out to abolish, and some have read the multiplication of crowned-nun portraits of this type as a defence of a private life under threat.

[9] Lorenzana's letter to the abbess of La Concepción of 1768 and his pastoral letter of 6 December 1769; Francisco Fabián y Fuero, *Colección de providencias diocesanas*, Puebla, 1770; on the Puebla resistance, Salazar de la Garza 1990, pp. 8–9, and Loreto López 2000, pp. 39–40.



Fig. 1: Domingo Ortiz, *Portrait of Sor Juana de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, 1797, oil on canvas, 102.2 x 82.6 cm (40 ¼ x 32 ½ in.), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 2021.430



Fig. 2: José de Alcíbar, *Portrait of Sor María Ignacia de la Sangre de Cristo*, ca. 1777, oil on canvas, 200.5 x 125.3 cm (78 ⅞ x 49 ⅜ in.), Museo Nacional de Historia, Mexico City



Fig. 3: Unknown artist, Puebla, *Portrait of Mother Ana María of the Precious Blood of Christ*, 1770, oil on canvas, 114.3 x 88.9 cm (45 x 35 in.), Denver Art Museum, Denver, inv. no. 2014.215

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