

Conventual enclosure, spiritual devotion, and artistic creation. Notes on some nun artists in Golden Age Spain and Portugal.¹

Rocío Soto Delgado
(Universidad de Málaga)

1. Introduction

The Spanish Golden Age, a renowned period of cultural and artistic prosperity, was marked by a wealth of creative accomplishments. Regrettably, the artistic works produced by women during this era have frequently been overlooked, disregarded, or undervalued by mainstream scholarship and historical narratives (Hidalgo Villena 2022, 120). However, a more optimistic and inclusive perspective has been emerging in recent years, thanks to the dedicated efforts of historians who, through a thoughtful gender-focused approach, are helping to thoroughly investigate, contextualize, and carefully examine the diverse artistic practices and productions of female artists from this pivotal historical period. In particular, these recent advancements have shed valuable light on the artistic practices and works produced by women within the sphere of the conventual enclosure.

However, despite the fact that historical records have documented the access to monastic life achieved by some female artists, the prominent scholar Ana Aranda Bernal incisively points out that research into women's artistic practice is often truncated and becomes considerably more arduous when attempting to cross the threshold of the cloister. Moreover, the critical reception surrounding these women and their artistic outputs has not been particularly benevolent or appreciative either, as it has frequently been shaped and coloured by the persistent stereotype of inexperienced or unskilled nuns, or by the influence of harsh prejudices regarding the perceived low quality of their creative endeavours (Sánchez López 2023, 194). While these reasons have historically contributed to the subsumption and erasure of the presence and creative work of women artists within convents, the field of gender and women's art studies still holds great potential to offer numerous valuable contributions and new perspectives through further research and scholarship.

In this sense, one of the main objectives of this study is to offer a brief overview of the artistic contributions and experiences of women artists during the Golden Age in Spain and Portugal. These women carried out their creative work within the convents of the time, often in highly diverse and heterogeneous ways that reflected the unique social and cultural contexts in which they operated.

2. Women and Artistic Creation in the 16th and 17th Centuries: Contextual Considerations and Challenges

During the Golden Age, those women of noble birth practised painting and drawing as part of an education that would turn them into refined aristocrats (Camacho. 1994, 86). However, most artists of the sixteenth, seventeenth and seventeenth centuries are linked to family workshops (Mayayo 2003, 30). In fact, it is difficult to find women belonging to the temporal coordinates of the Golden Age who learned an artistic craft outside the workshop environment under the protection of an artist father or husband (López 2007, 41). The reality was that women had to suffer the limitations of a strongly protectionist, androcentric and endogamic guild system. The aggregation, which was the

¹ This work is part of the author's doctoral thesis research, funded by an FPU contract from the Ministry of Universities, Spain.

usual procedure in Spain for the practice of art until its definitive suppression in 1813 in the Cortes de Cádiz (Martín 1984, 17).

The formative process and life journey that a male apprentice undergoes is unparalleled in the female world. Logic would lead us to believe that an aspiring artist could, on equal terms with boys, sign an apprenticeship contract with a master painter or sculptor, obtain a master's degree, practise the trade freely and open her own workshop. The fact is that coercion due to social and moral prejudices was one of the main obstacles. It was considered unacceptable for a young woman to leave her home to go to someone else's house, since, in addition to being under the legal-professional custody of the master, she would remain under the private yoke of another man with whom she did not share any kinship relationship that would defend professional cooperation or the bond of habitation.

Furthermore, although declaring the family workshop as the nucleus of women's artistic flourishing clarifies the obscurity that still exists about women's activity, paradoxically, it also explains the absence of their names in the registers. This cooperative character has a consequence that works to the clear detriment of women: the dissolution of the attribution of authorship, usually deposited in the person who creatively directs the business and is constituted as the visible personality, that is, the father/master/director of the workshop (Aranda Bernal 2007, 34). These obstacles prevented them from being full members and led them, irremediably, to an intuitive instruction within the workshop. For this reason, the existence of documents in which the apprenticeship of a girl or artistic instruction by a female teacher is recorded is a real rarity. The most pragmatic, if not the most equitable, recourse was for those women fortunate enough to have been born into a family of artists, suspended in an eternal limbo of minority, to continue working in the workshop under the umbrella of their father or some of the brothers who were heirs to the family business. Dependence and representativeness because of marriage to a man belonging to the guild was another solution (Sánchez López 2016, 90).

However, the socially desired and ascribed destiny for the great majority of these creators was marriage and motherhood, which led to the abandonment of their activity, since it was expected that they would devote themselves body and soul to their domestic chores. This reality was especially common when the spouses were not in the same profession and, considering that the young women were married at an early age, the artistic production they were able to conceive was very limited. For those for whom there was a glimmer of hope of combining family obligations and professional practice, it must also have been an arduous task. They must have suffered the disadvantages of what we now know as the “double day” and, consequently, produced fewer and smaller works at a time when the monumentality of their creations was held in high esteem (Aranda Bernal 2007, 39) or continued to collaborate, sometimes in the shadows of anonymity, with their fathers or husbands. A particular case was that of Luisa Ignacia Roldán, a sculptor from Seville, who had to relegate the ability to establish agreements and arrange works to her husband. Another circumstance related to the status of women was widowhood. This would have allowed some of them to take over the male trade or the management of the workshop, even competing professionally with other workers (López 2007, 41) and would have expanded women's active participation in the art world despite the restrictions of the guild.

Ana Aranda Bernal suggests that a “close look” can also “highlight the intervention of a good number of other women [...] [such as] nuns” (Aranda Bernal 2005, 230). In this sense, the convents were spaces where women were able to develop their artistic skills.

3. A Room of One's Own...in the Cloister: A Creative Environment

Within the social framework of Spain during the Ancient Regime, one of the few available avenues for women to preserve their respectable social standing was through the institution of marriage. This zealous protection of female honor was inextricably linked to the imperative of preserving virtue, as articulated by Gaspar Lucas Hidalgo in his work *Diálogos de apacible entretenimiento*: “parece de derecho natural que la mujer sea prenda de un solo dueño [...] y hasta llegar a este estado de tener dueño sea de ninguno y esté guardada del estado virginal y honesto” (Hidalgo 2010, 172). An alternative was to dedicate themselves to God through a life of seclusion in a religious order. The act of enclosure expanded beyond the domestic and marital spheres, permeating the walls of the monastic cloister. In the convents, the separation from the world and the physical posture of circumspection would further the women’s ability to guard their chastity, a daunting responsibility, since “without chastity, the other virtues are of no price or value” (Lehfeldt 2005).

The cloisters contained a highly diverse group of women, with a wide range of reasons for entering religious life. While some were driven by sincere piety and a desire for deliberate isolation, others were motivated by factors unrelated to spiritual devotion (Sánchez Lora 1988, 140). The religious vocation and the attraction towards a contemplative, mystical *modus vivendi* in full union with God led many women to voluntary cloistering. Moreover, society's energetic guardianship of female honesty disguised entry into the convent as the perfect alternative to marriage, in which the safeguarding of virginity was unattainable (Camacho 2004, 719). Another of the reasons given by José Sánchez Lora is the imbalance existing in many families between the desire to obtain honour and prestige through fruitful and lucrative marriages and the economic impossibility of carrying out such pretensions. As a result, the practice became widespread of, in the case of several daughters, duly marrying off one and sending the rest to convents, which required lesser dowries. Additionally, due to *homo barochus* conception of the ephemerality of life, convent sacrifice was seen as the perfect mechanism to achieve eternal salvation. For many families, the convent provided a respectable and economical option to place unmarried daughters, allowing them to maintain social status while limiting financial burden. Furthermore, the religious devotion and spiritual fulfilment offered by convent life was viewed to secure divine grace and eternal redemption, attracting families to this solution despite the sacrifice of separating from their daughters (Camacho 2004, 720). It is also worth examining whether female seclusion, regardless of intentionality, served as a refuge, a way to escape the prescribed societal roles, and a form of self-affirmation distinct from social violence (Sánchez Lora 1988, 31-32).

The question of whether religious life provided a refuge from the social coercion experienced by women remains unresolved, as do other related issues. Additionally, we must consider whether the cloister environment fostered the creative expression of women with artistic inclinations or, conversely, led them into a fruitless seclusion. Joining a religious order, similar to marriage, was a means for women artists to gain social standing. However, this often removed them from the family workshop where they may have engaged in collaborative artistic work, thereby halting their creative output (Aranda Bernal 2007, 47). Fortunately, the destiny of others, noblewomen or daughters of masters, was to continue their artistic endeavours within their respective monasteries, creating devotional images to benefit the religious orders. As previously noted, the motivations behind their creative work shifted away from professionalization and were instead driven by spiritual impulses. Additionally, the financial constraints of women's convents prevented them from commissioning external artists, compelling the nuns to design

images for their own worship (Cherta 2001, 740). Consequently, women's visibility and involvement in the public domain, as well as their participation in the dynamics of commissions and contractual relationships inherent to the art profession, were significantly and completely diminished (Sánchez López 2016, 91). On the other hand, for those nuns who had not been fortunate enough to have previously worked in the family workshop or in the court, the artistic apprenticeship had to be largely self-taught, as they did not have the benefit of formal training or the guidance of experienced artisans. These nuns had to rely on their own dedication, creativity, and perseverance to develop their artistic skills and hone their craft through independent study and practice.

The artistic endeavours of these female artists were also sanctioned by the monastic regulations themselves, which permitted space for manual labour. This is exemplified in Chapter XV of the Rule of St. Augustine:

“De la labor de manos”: Por ser la ociosidad infeliz maestra de mucha malicia; y porque al contrario la honesta ocupación en la labor de las manos está recomendada en las Divinas Letras, y particularmente se celebra como loable calidad de una muger virtuosa; se exhorta en el Señor a todas las Religiosas dé este Convento, que en todo tiempo aborrezcan el ocio, y que fuera de los Actos de Comunidad, y de sus particulares ejercicios de devoción, procuren siempre estar Religiosamente ocupadas en alguna labor honesta, y provechosa, en que útilmente empleen el tiempo, que les sobrare.

Of course, the demands of religious life, such as prayer or convent administration, determined the character and scope of these women's artistic production. In fact, Gil Ambrona states that “reading, writing, painting or mortification could not always be considered as a form of distraction for these women, as they were sometimes carried out out of obedience to confessors and superiors” (Gil Ambrona 1996, 65). The artistic production of these women can be categorized into two main types. The first consists of devotional works that reflect their deep spiritual experiences and devotional activities, such as depictions of saints, biblical narratives, devotional crosses, and portraits of deceased sisters who were important members of the religious community. The second type encompasses the decorative works, and even pseudo-restorations and repainting, that nuns with artistic talents performed within their convents (Aranda Bernal 2007, 48).

4. Artists Who Professed, Nuns Who Painted: Artistic Production and Written Testimony

The women who created art within convent walls came from diverse backgrounds. Some were the daughters of painters or sculptors, who had received artistic training in the family workshop before entering religious life. Others were from noble families and had been educated in the arts prior to joining the convent. Additionally, there were women who were self-taught and developed their creative skills while living in the convent. While we have surviving works by some of these artists, others are only known through written or autobiographical accounts of their artistic talents and practices.

According to José De Mesa and Teresa Gisbert, there is no evidence that María Josefa Sánchez was a nun or member of a religious order, as she does not use the title “Sor” or other honorifics typically adopted by women upon entering religious life (Gómez Román 2021, 95). However, according to Ana Aranda, Josefa Sánchez was either a nun who painted or a painter who may have taught. While Sánchez's artistic style did not demonstrate innovation and adhered to the Mannerist aesthetic, her technical execution was comparable to that of the renowned masters of the Toledo school, with whom she shared significant stylistic affinities. (Aranda Bernal 2007, 49). The devotional cross,

recently acquired by the Meadows Art Museum in Dallas [Figure 1], is characterized by a crucified Christ gazing upwards and wearing a crown of thorns. His elongated limbs and expressive features evoke the Mannerist artistic style. The cross is stained by the blood flowing from the wounds caused by the nails and from Christ's forehead, signifying the purity that has been defiled. Depicted on the arms of the cross are Saint Francis of Assisi with the stigmata and Saint Anthony of Padua holding the infant Jesus and a martyr's palm. The lower portion of the cross features an Immaculate Conception, depicted as a woman dressed in a white robe and a blue mantle adorned with stars, crowned by the sun and surrounded by twelve stars. She stands upon a crescent moon, symbolizing her triumph over evil.

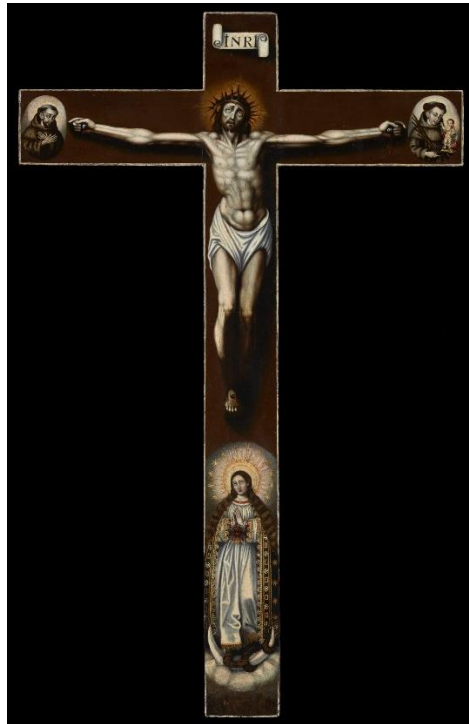


Figure 1. María Josefa Sánchez, *Cruz de celda* (c. 1640), Meadows Museum, Dallas. Photography: Jaime Eguiguren.

In 17th-century Malaga, the artistic careers of two exceptional female sculptors stand out: Andrea and Claudia de Mena, the daughters and collaborators of the renowned sculptor Pedro de Mena y Medrano. Born in 1654 and 1655 respectively, they received their artistic training within their father's workshop before entering the convent of Santa Ana del Císter in 1672, where they took on the religious names of Andrea de la Encarnación and Claudia de la Asunción (Sánchez López 2016, 92).

Andrea's remarkable skill is evident in her Letters of Profession, dated 1672, which have been attributed to her by the esteemed art historian Professor Rosario Camacho (Camacho 2004). Further confirmation of Andrea's artistic prowess can be found in the ivory plaques adorning the busts of *Ecce Homo* and *Dolorosa* [Figure 2], held by the Hispanic Society of America in New York. These plaques bear the inscription: “*Soror Andrea in/ M. Cisterciensi F.t/Malacae anno 1675*”, indicating that the pieces were either a gift or a commission for a benefactor of the monastery or a close relative of the Mena family, according to the analysis of scholar Juan Antonio Sánchez López (Sánchez López 2023, 201). In these captivating works, Andrea demonstrates her exceptional artistic talent, her ability to masterfully execute the compositional schemes learned in her

father's workshop, and her skill in creating dramatic and expressive pieces that adhere to the precepts of Baroque art, all within the small dimensions of the sculptures.



Figure 2: Andrea de Mena, Mater Dolorosa and Ecce-Homo (1647), The Hispanic Society of America. Photography: The Hispanic Society of America.

Alongside her sister Claudia, Andrea's technical prowess is further showcased in the small candlestick images of Saint Benedict and Saint Bernard, which were likely used in processions or convent festivities, where she skilfully defined the personalities of the Cistercian patriarchs through intricate physiognomic contrasts. This is demonstrated by the following archive document, which mentions the lemons that the nuns donated for their vestments:

...mas hicieron sus hijas Andrea de la Encarnación y Claudia de la Asunción, monjas de este convento, dos hechuras de nuestros Padres San Benito y San Bernardo para las procesiones de sus días; más de limosnas que se juntaron entre todas las religiosas los vistieron e hicieron cogullas de tela. (Gómez García 1997, 221)

The monastery also features another example of artistic production, as evidenced by the work of mother María de San Jerónimo (Gómez García 1997, 221):

...por su devoción al trabajo, de sus manos hizo la hechura de la Madre de Dios del coro alto, y a mi Padre San José y el Niño Jesús que tiene en los brazos que reciben las monjasy entran a derezo, y hecho peana al Niño Jesús que dá los velos.

If these sculptural works were not paid, the case of the nun Melchora Durán, a professed nun in the Convent of San Bernardo, stands in stark contrast. Durán gained significant fame during her time as a renowned and accomplished embroiderer, whose skilled handiwork was highly regarded (Gómez García 1997, 220)

Josefa de Ayala, born in Seville in 1630, received artistic training in the studio of her father, the painter Baltazar Gomes Figueira. Around 1634, she relocated to Portugal, where she later resided with her family in the town of Óbidos. A decade thereafter, Josefa entered the Augustinian Convent of Santa Ana in Coimbra. It was within this convent that she produced an engraving of Saint Catherine [Figure 3], which represents her earliest

known work. This engraving is one of three attributed to her, each signed in the lower margin as “S. Catarina. Josepha f. Ayala, in Coimbra, 1646.” (Soto Delgado 2022, 368).



Figure 3: Josefa de Ayala, *Saint Catherine* (1646), Xavier da Costa Collection. Photography: Wikipedia.

The following copper-plate painting *marriage of Saint* the first iteration of a motif that would recur throughout her artistic production.

year, Josefa created a titled *Mystical Catherine* [Figure 4],



Figure 4: Josefa de Ayala, *Mystical marriage of Saint Catherine* (1647), Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisboa. Photography: Wikipedia.

Raised environment

to the arts due to her father's profession, Josefa demonstrated her proficiency in drawing and oil painting while behind the convent walls. Although the conventual life was a path of no return for many women, Josefa, after a stint at another monastery in Santa Maria de Celas, also in Coimbra, ultimately returned to her family at an unspecified time (Soto Delgado 2022, 371). Despite leaving the convent life permanently, Josefa achieved success as a painter and supported herself through her art.

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In addition to Josefa de Ayala, Vítor Serrao's research has uncovered the names of several other women painters who were active in Portuguese convents. These include Cecília do Espírito Santo, a nun at the Convent of Chagas in Vila Viçosa, Maria dos Anjos, who was professed at the convent of Santa Maria de Sena in Évora, and Sister Joana Baptista (Serrão 2001). Born in Campo Maior, she was the daughter of D. João de Meneses and D. Madalena da Silva and her lay shoulder was Jerónima de Menese (Serrão 2017, 5). The convent of Estremoz, where she lived, was protected by São João Baptista, which may have inspired the spiritual name she took. According to Felgueiras Gayo's *Nobiliário de Famílias de Portugal*, Don João de Meneses and Dona Madalena da Silva had a son and four daughters, three of whom pursued religious vocations, with only Dona Jerónima residing in the Estremoz convent. Among the artworks is a copper painting depicting Saint Mary Magdalene renouncing worldly vanities which Vítor Serrao describes as having a “Josephic” style, potentially influenced by Josefa de Ayala [Figure 5].



Figure 5: Sor Joana Baptista, *Saint Mary Magdalene renouncing worldly vanities* (late 17th century). Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon. Photograph: ArtHerstory.

In addition to the use of copper, the artist also incorporated wooden elements as the pictorial support in his creation of a beautifully rendered oratory depicting a Holy Family scene [Figure 6]. Each individual vignette or narrative image within the work is framed by intricate geometric motifs and a generous application of gilding, heightening the visual.



Figure 6: Sor Joana Baptista, Oratory depicting the Holy Family. From the collection of Fr. Manuel do Cenáculo de Vilas-Boas. National Museum of Évora, Portugal. Photography: Jaime Eguiguren.

Another work depicts Saint Teresa's vision of the Holy Trinity [Figure 7], potentially inspired by an engraving from a series on the saint's life, created by Adriaen Collaert and Cornelis Galle I [Figure 8] (Eguiguren Pazzi, 3) The central figures in this scene rest upon heavenly clouds, with Saint Teresa kneeling in prayer, receiving the blessing of God the Father and Jesus Christ. The dove, emitting radiant beams, completes the Holy Trinity, all framed by a halo of vibrant orange light. Christ holds a cartouche inscribed in Latin, which reads: "See, daughter, how sinners are deprived of these good things." As in a theatrical performance, angels and cherubs act as joyful observers, commenting on the scene (Eguiguren Pazzi, 7).



Figure 7: Sor Joana Baptista. *Saint Teresa's vision of the Holy Trinity* (s. XVII). Colección privada, Madrid. Photograph by: Jaime Eguiguren.



Figure 8: Cornelio Galle I, Adrián Collaert. *Saint Teresa* (1613). From *Estampas de la Vida de la Santa Madre Teresa de Jesús*, British Museum. Photograph by: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes.

Ana María Gómez Román adds to this list of nun artists by including Sister Juana Úrsula de San José. This recognition is based on a significant episode in which Sister Juana Úrsula, a devout nun, experienced a mystical revelation about the Passion of Jesus. Inspired by this spiritual vision, she commissioned the Granada painter Mariana de la Cueva to create a canvas depicting Christ at the column, a poignant scene from the Passion narrative (Gómez Román 2021, 101). Once finished, the nun “to be in conformity with her original idea. The Servant of God sent for a paintbrush, and with a single brushstroke, she perfectly uncovered one ear.” (Gómez Román 2023, 149). This painting, created in 1656, is signed and dedicated to Sister Juana Úrsula, with the dedication appearing on the pedestal of the column depicted in the work (Gómez Román 2022, 231).

Another explicit citation that reveals the presence of another nun who devoted herself to painting is found in the work of Alonso Villerino. This is Sister Francisca de San José, an Augustinian Recollect nun who professed in the convent of Valladolid, where she became the third prioress:

Supo el Arte de pintar tan consumadamente, como testifican las obras, que de su mano se conservan oy: Y a no averse muerto tan presto, hubiera dexado adornada la Iglesia, y coro con pinturas de gran primor. Dexó en bosquejo muchos Santos de los, que habitaron los Yermos de nuestra Sagrada Religión: un retrato de nuestra señora de la Assumpcion, que el Convento tiene en Capilla, que le dedicó: muy visitada de la devoción de las religiosas, por lo que mueve al recuerdo de la Reyna de los Angeles, y del zelo de la que con tan primorosa mano la pintó. También dexo acabada con suma perfección una Imagen de Christo Señor nuestro de estremada devoción, que representa lo lastimoso, de quando los Sayones le desataron de la Coluna, después de açotado, que mueve mucho, a los que la miran, a compasión: y juntamente a los que entienden del Arte, a la debida admiración, de que sea de mano de mugger. (Villerino 1690, 188-189)

Although no works have been definitively attributed to María de la Concepción Valdés, her accomplishments as a painter and miniaturist are widely recognized. Daughter of the renowned painter Juan de Valdés Leal and sister of Luisa, who also worked as a

polychromist, sculptor, and engraver, María entered the monastery of San Clemente in Seville as a novice in 1681 at the age of seventeen, following her training in her father's workshop. However, according to Parada y Santín, before entering the cloister, the artist had painted portraits for a distinguished clientele who applauded his work for its beautiful coloring and skilled technique (Parada y Santín 1903, 374).

Various historical sources, including Ceán Bermúdez's acclaimed *Diccionario histórico de los más ilustres profesores de las Bellas Artes en España*, provide significant documentation and references to her artistic career and achievements:

[...] pintora, natural de Sevilla y religiosa del orden del Cister en el real monasterio de S. Clemente de aquella ciudad. Fue hija y discípula de D. Juan de Valdés Leal: pintó muy bien al óleo y de miniatura, e hizo retratos con facilidad y semejanza. Falleció profesa en su monasterio el año de 1730 [...]. (Ceán Bermúdez 1800, 107)

It is also important to mention the *Adiciones al diccionario histórico de los más ilustres profesores de las bellas artes en España* by D. Juan Agustín Ceán Bermúdez, a work written by Cipriano Muñoz y Manzano, conde de Viñaza. This work acts as a complement to Ceán Bermúdez's original work, including references to various artists, such as the sculptor Soror Mencía de la Olivia, a native of Córdoba (Lavín González 2018, 74).

The scholarly article “Pintoras granadinas” published in the journal *La Alhambra*, authored by Parada and Santín, also discusses two notable female figures: Catalina de Mendoza and Sister Ana de San Jerónimo. Catalina, the natural daughter of Íñigo López de Mendoza, Marquis of Mondéjar, was a Jesuit who passed away in Granada in 1527. The author reference the biography written by the Jesuit Jerónimo de Pereda, highlighting Catalina's role as the founder of the College of the Society of Jesus in Alcalá de Henares. She is categorized among the group of painter-nuns, with the text emphasizing her extensive knowledge in fields such as science, mathematics, sacred texts, and languages, as well as her talents as a musician and skilled draughtsman. Likewise, Sister Ana de San Jerónimo, daughter of the Counts of Torrepalma, is presented as an esteemed nun with remarkable aptitudes and exceptional abilities in poetry and painting (Gómez Román 2023, 144).

Earlier, we discussed how the training process, generally based on imitation, becomes purely self-taught when the nun has spent her entire life in isolation. This is likely the case of Teresa del Niño Jesús, a painter and sculptor who entered the monastery of Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles in Valladolid at the age of eight and took her vows at the age of sixteen. Fortunately, she has left behind a substantial body of work. The canvases on the dome of the church of her convent, depicting St. Michael, St. Raphael, St. Gabriel, and the Guardian Angel, are particularly noteworthy. Additionally, the work depicting the “Divine Saviour” dictating the Rule to Marina Escobar, the founder of the Order, is also outstanding. Furthermore, she produced numerous other works that are housed within her convent, including a crucifix (Martínez Díaz, López F. Cao 2000, 169).

The references to women such as Cecilia del Nacimiento and María de San Ignacio are also noteworthy. Cecilia del Nacimiento, who served as prioress of Calahorra, was knowledgeable in ecclesiastical matters, the humanities, Latin, music, and painting. It is believed that she created a portrait of the renowned writer and musician, Sister María de San Alberto. Five of Cecilia's paintings were displayed on the walls of the convent in Valladolid, one of which depicted the image of the Savior, while the other four featured the subject of the “Ecce homo”. The Augustinian Recollect, María de San Ignacio, born in 1592, is said to have channeled her enthusiasm for art to the point where her own blood became the medium for her works (Gil Ambrona 1987, 64-65).

The existing autobiographical writings produced by artists during this period, though exceptional, offer valuable insights. One of the most noteworthy works is that of Estefanía de la Encarnación, a Franciscan nun from the Santa Clara monastery in Lerma, Castile and León. Despite the absence of autograph copies, two manuscript versions of her text are known to survive. This document has not only enhanced our understanding of its author's life and artistic practice, but has also provided information about other women, including Beatriz de Villena, to whom Estefanía de la Encarnación gave drawing instruction (Lavín González 2018, 73). Beatriz later became a Clarissa nun at the Monastery of the Ascension of Our Lord in Lerma, where Estefanía herself would also profess a few years later. Estefanía de la Encarnación, born in Madrid at the end of the 16th century, was the daughter of a noble father and a mother of more modest background, yet one educated enough to instruct her in Reading (Bass, Tiffany 2020). For several years, the young woman resided and received training under the tutelage of her maternal aunt and her aunt's husband, the painter Alonso Páez, as she herself has attested.

[...]En fin, como hiçiesen tantos espantos deste borrón, y me pussiessen en conciencia que no perdiessse tal natural en habilidad que para mujer había de ser notable y de provecho, sacándome exemplos de la Sofonísma² y de otra que entonces había muerto celebradíssima en toda la Cortte, esto me ayudó y el ser yo de mi natural amiguíssima de saber, y así empeçé a dibujar dándome una liçion dello el marido de mi tía, que se llamava Alonso Páez. [...]. (Barbeito 1987, 156)

Estefania frequently accompanied her mother on visits to the residences of aristocratic women, which resulted in the recognition of her artistic abilities by the Duke of Lerma. The Duke then persuaded Estefania to take religious vows, waiving the requirement for a dowry in exchange for her services as a painter (Bass, Tiffany, 2020). The young woman accepted, much to the chagrin of her parents...

[...] más mostró ser con gusto de Dios...Todos me lo contradecían, porque quando entravan a verme pintar, y luego sabían que havia de ser monja y en Lerma, eran cosas las que deçían que parece me venían a meter en el infierno... (1987, 158).

She describes the subsequent events as follows:

Empeçaron a gustar tanto de mis habilidades y a haçerme tanto aplauso así religiosas como seglares... que no se tratava de otra cosa, ni tenían otro entretenimiento que...verme pintar y mirar mis pinturas y cargarme también de obras [...]. (Barbeito 1987, 159)

Estefanía joined the convent at around eighteen years old in 1615 and resided there until her passing in 1665. As for her artistic output, only two of her creations are known today, both situated within the Monastery of the Ascension: a canvas depicting the Immaculate Conception and the mural paintings she completed for a chapel dedicated to Saint John the Evangelist (Bass, Tiffany 2020).

5. Epilogue

² We assume that this refers to the Italian painter Sofonisba Anguissola.

During the Golden Age in Portugal and Spain, the women religious played a crucial role in the cultural and religious sphere of their time. Despite the social restrictions and limitations imposed on women, a significant number of these religious figures excelled in various artistic and literary disciplines, leaving a remarkable legacy.

Some nuns acquired their artistic skills through family workshops, where they were able to learn from experienced artists within their own households. Others learned it as part of their training as aristocrats. Meanwhile, others developed their talents independently, through self-study and dedication to their craft. Within the convent, the nuns were not only dedicated to prayer and contemplation, but also actively engaged in the production of visual art. Their works, which included painting, embroidery, and sculpture, often possessed a deeply religious character, reflecting their devotion and the contemplative lifestyle they maintained. These creations were not only manifestations of faith, but also expressions of talent and creativity that enriched the artistic heritage of the time. The nuns harnessed their artistic abilities to create diverse religious works, ranging from ornate altarpieces and devotional paintings to intricate textile pieces and sculpted religious imagery.

Furthermore, convents functioned as significant centers of education and culture. The nuns were not only focused on their spiritual development, but also facilitated learning among their counterparts. Through their artistic endeavors, they demonstrated their intellectual capacities and made significant contributions to the cultural and spiritual life of their communities. Some nuns would provide instruction in art and drawing, thereby serving as keepers of knowledge in a context where educational access for women was limited. Despite their exclusion from the public sphere, these women found ways to circumvent the social restrictions placed upon them and develop their artistic abilities for various purposes. Some were able to gain renown within the confines of their convents, receiving specific commissions and establishing themselves as recognized practitioners. Others contributed to the decoration and ornamentation of churches and monasteries through their skilled sculptural and pictorial works. These religious women employed a diverse range of artistic techniques, such as oil painting on wood and copper, engraving, and polychrome sculpture, producing a wide array of artistic typologies that included oratories, canvases, cell crosses, and mural paintings.

As research in this field advances, it is plausible that new written accounts and works will emerge that further document the efforts and achievements of these women, despite the various adversities they faced, such as the destruction, disappearance, or anonymity that often surrounded their creations.

In conclusion, the artistic nuns of the Golden Age made substantial and enduring contributions to the artistic and cultural legacy of their era. They not only enriched the religious and spiritual life of their communities, but also challenged prevailing social conventions by demonstrating that women could indeed be accomplished artists, although in a unique manner.

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