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A Mughal Princess in Baroque New Spain

Catarina de San Juan (1606-1688), the china poblana

FEW FIGURES HAVE SO captivated the popular Mexican imagination as the *china poblana*, yet few are so poorly understood.¹ Her pervasive image is beloved by tourists and schoolchildren, celebrated by folk troupes, lauded in poetry, reenacted in plays and cinema, and extolled by politicians. Originally a symbol of civic pride for the city of Puebla, she went on to epitomize the Republican spirit following the French invasion (1862-1863), and eventually embodied the very essence of Mexico itself. As the designer of an elaborate municipal monument in her glory proclaimed in the 1940s: “[the china poblana] simboliza el ALMA NACIONAL... el arquetipo NACIONAL de la virtuosa mujer mexicana.”² Some say she was an ancient princess from China, whose luxurious silks inspired the folk costume of today. Others insist that her origins are to be found on Mexican soil, in the Poblano heartland. So, who was she?

She was in fact two people. The china poblana of the popular imagination—of the brightly embroidered blouse and *rebozo* shawl—is an invention

1. I would like to thank Clara Bargellini for rekindling my interest in the *china poblana*, and for directing me to readings in viceregal painting. I am also grateful to Elizabeth Rhodes for her editorial comments.

2. Luis G. Andrade (1941), quoted in Rafael Carrasco Puente, *Bibliografía de Catarina de San Juan y de la china poblana*, Mexico, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1950, p. 4.

of the nineteenth century. A symbol of Mexican womanhood, she is related to Spanish prototypes such as the *maja* immortalized in paintings by Murillo and Goya. In this sense, the name *china* is simply a generic term for “servant,” “country girl,” or even “concubine”—reflecting her various roles in Mexican legend.³ Since viceregal times, however, the word *china* referred more specifically to a person of Asian background, usually Filipino, but also Chinese, Japanese, or Indian. It was only because of this terminological coincidence that the country girl of the *jarabe* became confused with an earlier china of a much different kind.

The original china poblana was once as important a symbol of her city and era as her more vivacious successor. Now largely forgotten, Catarina de San Juan (1606-1688) was renowned in her day as an anchorite and visionary, and was consulted by nobles, promoted by great churchmen, and venerated by the people. Born into an aristocratic Muslim family in Mughal India, she made the perilous journey to New Spain at an early age and transformed herself into a Counter-Reformation mystic. Her funeral, which culminated in an elaborate catafalque adorned with paintings and poetry, was attended by some of the most important people in New Spain, including Antonio Núñez de Miranda (1618-1695), the Jesuit confessor to her contemporary Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695).⁴ Like so many holy figures of her day, Catarina became a heroine for a *criollo* class, desperate for a local saint—even though she was a foreigner herself.⁵ She also became a special favorite of the Jesuits, who proclaimed her as *hija* or even *hermana* of the

3. Francisco de la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan: princesa de la India y visionaria de Puebla*, Mexico, Libros de México, 1971, p. 12, and Chía Bolaños Montiel, *Recopilación de la vida y leyenda de Catarina de San Juan y la china poblana*, Puebla, Comité de la Feria de Puebla, 1993, pp. 11-17.

4. De la Maza, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-131. It was very likely that Sor Juana knew about her, since Núñez de Miranda was one of Catarina's promoters and Sor Juana wrote of her admiration for her fellow visionary María de Jesús de Agreda; see Clark Colahan, *The Visions of Sor María de Agreda: Writing Knowledge and Power*, Tucson, University of Arizona, 1994, p. 32. Núñez was himself a mystic; see Elisa Vargaslugo, “Mística y pintura barroca en la Nueva España,” in *Arte y mística del barroco*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Colegio de San Ildefonso, Mexico, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes-Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México-Departamento del Distrito Federal, 1994 (hereafter, *Arte y mística*...), p. 34.

5. The campaign for sanctification was very strong in seventeenth-century Puebla, which was home to such holy figures as Sebastián de Aparicio, María de Jesús, Isabel de Encar-

Society.⁶ Engravings of *la chinita* ranked among the most venerated images in the viceroyalty, and three separate versions of her story were published, one of which—at 928 pages—was the longest work ever to come out of New Spain.⁷ She might have been as celebrated today as her Peruvian counterpart Rose of Lima (1586-1619) had the Inquisition not forcibly eradicated her memory within ten years of her death.

The legend of Catarina de San Juan makes compelling reading on its own, but her ecstasies have special relevance to art. Experienced by an intensely visual woman immersed in Counter-Reformation culture, Catarina's apparitions belong as much to the history of viceregal painting as to the literature of mysticism. They are quintessentially Baroque. In scenes strongly reminiscent of the work of contemporary viceregal painters Cristóbal de Villalpando (ca. 1644-1714) and Juan Correa (ca. 1646-1716), the Virgin Mary rises in resplendent majesty above choirs of angels, Christ presides at lavish banquets in the clouds, cherubs and saints emerge from the flames of altar candles, and legions of devils do battle with the forces of Saint Michael. The most elaborate combine elements of painting and sculpture with architecture and even theater to form a dynamic empyrean, epitomizing the Baroque unity of the arts known in Mexico as *conjunto*. Their gilded brilliance evokes the splendor of Puebla's Baroque *pièce de resistance*, the chapel of the Rosary (1650-1690), the gilt and stuccoed chapel that earned the name the "Eighth Marvel of the New World."⁸ Other visions recall the sober and more austere *claroscurista* tradition of viceregal painting of the mid-seventeenth century. Also typically for her age, Catarina delved into hieroglyphics and the occult world of Hermeticism promoted by the great Jesuit polymath Athanasius

nación, and Bishop Juan de Palafox. The main promoters were from the *criollo* class; see De la Maza, *op. cit.*, p. 98, and Antonio Rubial García, *Domus aurea. La capilla del Rosario de Puebla*, Mexico, Universidad Iberoamericana, 1991, p. 27. Vargaslugo, *op. cit.*, p. 34, lists several mystical texts from seventeenth-century New Spain.

6. Her biographer, the Jesuit Alonso Ramos called her an "hija" and "hermana"; see De la Maza, *op. cit.*, p. 26. In a letter of recommendation, Joseph Vidal, s.i. declared that she was "tan Hija de la misma Compañía"; see Alonso Ramos, *Segunda parte de los prodigios de la omnipotencia y milagros de la gracia en la vida de la v. sierva de dios Catharina de S. Joan*, Puebla, Diego Fernández de León, 1690, p. 11.

7. De la Maza, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

8. Francisco de la Maza, *La decoración simbólica de la capilla del Rosario de Puebla*, Puebla, Atlipano, 1971, pp. 9-12.

Kircher (1601-1680).⁹ Like her near contemporary Sor María de Jesús de Agreda (1602-1665), she performed “bilocations”—roughly equivalent to imaginary air travel—and viewed the nations of the world as if she were walking on the pages of a Renaissance atlas, reflecting the increasing global awareness and aspirations of her society.

Catarina became the spokeswoman of Puebla’s *siglo de oro*. Not only did her visions reflect current artistic trends, but many of them were inspired by actual altarpieces and statues in specified locations in the city. Her visions advertised the artistic projects of her city in a period of growing municipal pride, following an unprecedented expansion of churches, convents, and other religious buildings in mid-century.¹⁰ But Catarina’s experiences were also original and prophetic, and may even have had an impact on later paintings, especially in the last decades of the seventeenth century. It is little wonder that she has already caught the attention of two of Mexico’s most prominent art historians: Manuel Toussaint and Francisco de la Maza.¹¹

*Catarina de San Juan in Asia
and the Cultural Mileu of the Mughal Court*

The flurry of excitement caused by an Indian *princesita* in New Spain had its origin in a society steeped in fantasies about the Orient and hopes of Christ-

9. René Taylor, “Hermeticism and Mystical Architecture in the Society of Jesus,” in *Baroque Art: The Jesuit Contribution*, edited by Rudolf Wittkower and Irma B. Jaffe, New York, Fordham University, 1972, pp. 81-85; Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana*, translated by Margaret Sayers Peden, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University, 1988, pp. 162 and 163-167, and Ignacio Osorio Romero, *La luz imaginaria: epistolario de Atanasio Kircher con los novohispanos*, Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1993. Contemporaries spoke of hieroglyphics when discussing the symbolism of architectural ornamentation, for example at the chapel of the Rosary; see De la Maza, *La decoración simbólica...*, p. 17. Ramos, *op. cit.*, p. IV, writes that Catarina used “los mismos Hieroglificos, de que usaba para darse à entender [...]”

10. Manuel Toussaint, *Colonial Art in Mexico*, translated and edited by Elizabeth Wilder Weismann, Austin, University of Texas, 1967, pp. 193-194, 196, and 203. Toussaint calls Puebla the Baroque city *par excellence*.

11. See Manuel Toussaint’s introduction to José del Castillo Grajeda, *Compendio de la vida y virtudes de la venerable Catarina de San Juan*, Mexico, Xóchitl, 1946 (first edition, Puebla,

ian conversion in infidel lands. Conventual and Episcopal libraries throughout the Viceroyalty possessed the latest travel books on the East, such as the voluminous *India oriental* (1601-1607), by Juan de Bry and Juan Israel, and tomes describing Asian missionary conquests like Daniello Bartoli's *Missione al Gran Mogor* (1663), and the extravagant *China illustrata* (1667), by Athanasius Kircher, a semi-mythical work on East Asia and India by a man who only visited them in his dreams.¹² Kircher even linked together Asian and Mexican antiquity by deriving Indian, Chinese, and Aztec culture from ancient Egypt and the great magus Hermes Trismegistus—a theory very popular with viceregal criollos eager for a native antiquity comparable with that of the Old World.¹³ What could be a more appropriate symbol of Christian conquest for the churchmen of seventeenth-century New Spain than to bring a visionary from the East Indies back into the fold with her West Indian brethren?

A major obstacle to studying Catarina's life and visions is presented by her three biographies. Although all three of her biographers (two of whom were her confessors) claim to record her very words, none of them are in complete agreement.¹⁴ The most authentic may be one by José del Castillo Grajeda, who tries so hard to be accurate that he transcribes her words in a peculiar dialect which contrasts strikingly with his elegant Spanish. None of Catarina's biographers provide more than sketchy details about her birth and early life in India, but one of them, a three-volume work by the Jesuit Alon-

Diego Fernández de León, 1692; a newer edition is Puebla, Bibliotheca Angelopolitana, 1987), pp. 9-16; and De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan*...

12. Judith Gutiérrez Reyes and Lucía Celaya Méndez, *Catálogo de la biblioteca del noviciado de los dieguinos de San José de Tacubaya*, Mexico, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia-Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1991, 3 vols., cat. nos. 16, 25, 26, and 27. Ramos himself cites Kircher's *China illustrata* and Bartoli's life of Rudolf Aquaviva; see Alonso Ramos, *Primera parte de los prodigios de la omnipotencia y milagros de la gracia en la vida de la venerable sierva de dios Catarina de San Joan*, Puebla, Diego Fernández de León, 1689, p. 5b. On Kircher in Mexican libraries, see also Paz, op. cit., pp. 176-177.

13. Both Kircher's *Ædipus ægyptiacus* and *China illustrata* helped encourage viceregal interest in pre-Columbian cultures. Kircher's work in general was extremely influential in seventeenth-century New Spain, where he was known at least from the 1650s, and was read avidly by both Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. Kircher himself even corresponded directly with viceregal intellectuals. The letters have recently been published; see Osorio Romero, op. cit., pp. xv-xliv, and Paz, op. cit., p. 166.

14. Ramos, *Primera parte de los prodigios*...; Ramos, *Segunda parte de los prodigios*...; Castillo Grajeda, op. cit.; Francisco de Aguilera, *Sermón en que se da noticia de la vida admirable, virtudes heroicas, y preciosa muerte de la venerable señora Catharina de San Joan*, Puebla, Diego

so Ramos, makes extravagant claims about her status and adventures there to help promote Jesuit mission enterprises in Asia. Thanks perhaps to the prodigalities of Ramos, few scholars have made a serious attempt to trace Catarina's Indian origins, and—understandably—many have doubted the more fantastic aspects of her story, particularly her reputed royal origin. But when the fragments of her childhood are placed against the background of seventeenth-century Indian history even the more outrageous claims of her biographers become possible.

At the time of Catarina's youth, Mughal India was arguably the most cosmopolitan nation on earth. World religions were freely tolerated, and refugees, merchants, soldiers, and missionaries from around the globe gathered within India's friendly borders. It was a land of mystics and visionaries, a land where living saints, inter-religious dialogue and translations of holy texts (including Catholic ones) were sponsored by the emperor himself. Like Cosimo de' Medici, Emperors Akbar (1556-1605) and Jahangir (1605-1627) promoted the study of neoplatonism, and invited to their court poets and artists from lands as diverse as Persia and Portugal.¹⁵ In this empire, ancient traditions—such as medieval Hindu kingship rites and legal codes inherited from Ghengis Khan—coexisted with new trends such as empirical observation in natural science and the *chiaroscuro* of Michelangelo. It was also a nation of warfare, political intrigue, buccaneers, and pirates, where borders and fortunes shifted and societies migrated. In short, India was a country where anything could happen.

Catarina was born around 1606 in the Northern plains of India in one of the imperial Mughal cities, most likely Agra, soon to be the home of the Taj Mahal (1632-1643), or Lahore, in present-day Pakistan.¹⁶ Her given name was Mirra (*mirr*), a common Arabic name meaning "bitterness" and related to our term "myrrh," and her mother's name was Borta (*barauta*), the name of

Fernández de León, 1688, and Alonso Ramos, *Tercera parte de los prodigios de la omnipotencia y milagros de la gracia en la vida de la v. sierva de dios Catharina de S. Ioan*, Puebla, Diego Fernández de León, 1692.

15. See Gauvin Alexander Bailey, "Counter Reformation Symbolism and Allegory in Mughal Painting", Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1996; Gauvin Alexander Bailey, "The Catholic Shrines of Agra," *Arts of Asia* (Kowloon [Hong Kong]), july-august, 1993, pp. 131-137, and Gauvin Alexander Bailey, "The Indian Conquest of Catholic Art: The Mughals, the Jesuits, and Imperial Mural Painting," *Art Journal* (New York), 1998, forthcoming.

16. I have chosen the birthdate given on her tombstone, which I have no reason to doubt. Scholars have varied considerably in their opinions: Nicolás León, *Catarina de San Juan y la*

a fragrant Indian summer fruit.¹⁷ The Mughal dynasty was a Muslim family of Chaghatai (Turco-Mongol) descent who invaded the subcontinent from Central Asia at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and went on to conquer most of India by the end of the seventeenth. Mirra probably also came from a Muslim Chaghatai family—in spite of Ramos' attempt to cleanse her past of that hated religion.¹⁸ Contemporary sources record, for example, that she had the light skin and hair of a Turk, instead of the darker pigment of India, and her Arabic name rules out a Hindu background.¹⁹

Mirra recalled that her maternal grandfather had been a prince who was “dueño absoluto de la Arabia y de la India” or “principe Mogor que tenia absoluto dominio en los Provincias, ó Reynos vezinos á la feñice Arabia, y á la India.”²⁰ She was likely referring to a more distant relative. The extended Mughal family all proudly claimed descent from the great Chaghatai emperor Timur, or Tamurlane (1336-1405), who held sway over a vast empire stretching from Syria to Transoxania and himself drew his genealogy back to Ghengis Khan.²¹ Although she did not remember his name, Mirra claimed that her own father came from the noblest branch of the Mughal family, and Ramos concluded with confirmation from other Indian immigrants that he

china poblana, Mexico, Biblioteca Aportación Histórica, 1946, pp. 11-12, has her born in 1609-1610; Toussaint's introduction to Castillo Grajeda, op. cit., p. 10, has her born in 1613-1614. All sources say that she was born in the Mughal empire, for example Ramos, *Segunda parte de los prodigios...*, p. 1, who calls her a “natural de el Mogor,” and Castillo Grajeda, op. cit., p. 29, who says “natural del reino del Mogor.”

17. Ramos, *Primera parte de los prodigios...*, p. 5a. For a mention of the barauta fruit, see Abu'l-Fazl, 'Allami, *Ain-i Akbari*, translated by H. Blochmann, Calcutta, Biblioteca Indorum, 1927-1949, vol. 1, p. 70. Borta is also a Chaghatai name meaning “deer”; see Wilhelm Radloff, *Versuch eines Wörterbuches der Türk-Dialekte IV*, St. Petersburg, Commissionnaires de l'Académie imperiale des sciences, 1888-1911, col. 1665. By a strange coincidence, “The Mother” (1878-1973), twentieth-century India's most celebrated female guru, who lived at the ashram of Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), near Pondicherry, was also named “Mirra.”

18. As De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 33, points out, Ramos was very unwilling to believe that she was a Muslim, because that was more repugnant to him than a Hindu.

19. Aguilera, quoted in León, op. cit., p. 37, writes, “Su color más blanco que trigueño, el cabello rubio, la frente espaciosa, los ojos vivos, la nariz bien nivelada...”

20. Ramos, *Primera parte de los prodigios...*, pp. 4b-5a. Here, and throughout the text, I have retained the orthography of the original publications.

21. Ramos calls him “Maximiano” or “Maximino.” The Roman-sounding name is almost certainly nothing more than an invention of her biographer who had trouble with foreign names—an extremely common phenomenon from medieval times when Ghengis Khan was

was likely “Nieta, ò conjunta muy cercana del Invicto Emperador del Mogor, Mahameth Zeladín Ecchabar, ó Achabar [Akbar], que murio el año de mil seiscientos, y cinco.”²² While this may seem to be a fabrication by a notoriously fertile imagination, her claim that she lived in a palace beside a river—the location of the royal fortresses that housed the extended family of the emperor—and especially her likely Chaghatai origins lend it credibility.

Both of Mirra’s parents reputedly had Christian leanings, and experienced frequent visions of Christian saints, including one in which the Virgin Mary presaged Mirra’s near-miraculous birth after twenty years of sterile union.²³ Ramos wrote about Mirra’s parents that they did everything they could to “introducir en ella la devoción, á la Madre del verdadero Dfios: y horror à la Idolatria,” and even went so far as to suggest that Borta received baptism.²⁴ None of this is as ridiculous as it may seem. Mirra’s family lived in a milieu that was saturated with Christian imagery and intimately familiar with contemporary post-Tridentine dogma. Images of Christ and Christian saints painted in High-Renaissance style prominently adorned the principal Mughal palaces, gardens, and tombs, and proliferated in royal picture albums (figure 1).²⁵ Introduced by the Jesuit missionaries, who were present at court from 1580, these images were co-opted by the imperial government as a sym-

known throughout Europe as “King David” and a petty despot from Beijing could be called “George”; see F. Zarncke, “Der Priester Johannes,” *Königliche Sächsische Gesellschaft der Wissenschaft: Philologische-Historische Classe: Abhandlungen*, 1879, vol. VIII, p. 869. It was probably no coincidence, as De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 32, points out, that Maximinus was also the name of the Roman emperor (308-313) who ruled as governor over Syria and Egypt and was responsible for the martyrdom of Catarina’s namesake Catherine of Alexandria. On Timur’s own patronage of painting, see Gauvin Alexander Bailey, “The Three Ages of Man: A Timurid Masterpiece is Reunited,” *Oriental Art* (London), winter 1996-1997, vol. XLII, no. 4, pp. 2-7.

22. Ramos, *Primera parte de los prodigios...*, p. 5a. Ramos, *ibid.*, pp. 4b-5a, wrote about Mirra that “era Nobilissima; Hija, ò descendiente de los Reyes del Oriente, ò Emperadores del Mogor,” and “Luego si nació en el Mogor, ò en alguna de las Ciudades sugetas, ò coligadas con su Imperio, y eran sus Abuelos e los Paternos mas esclareidos, que los Maternos.” He declared, *ibid.*, p. 4b, that other Indian immigrants confirmed these statements: “Confiriose con los dichos, y contestacion de algunos paysanos suyos, que en varios tiempos, y ocasiones arribaron à estos Reynos.”

23. *Ibid.*, p. 11b.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 14a and 20b. Castillo Grajeda, *op. cit.*, p. 30, makes a more mystical interpretation of her baptism.

25. See Bailey “The Catholic Shrines...,” and Bailey, “Counter Reformation Symbolism...”

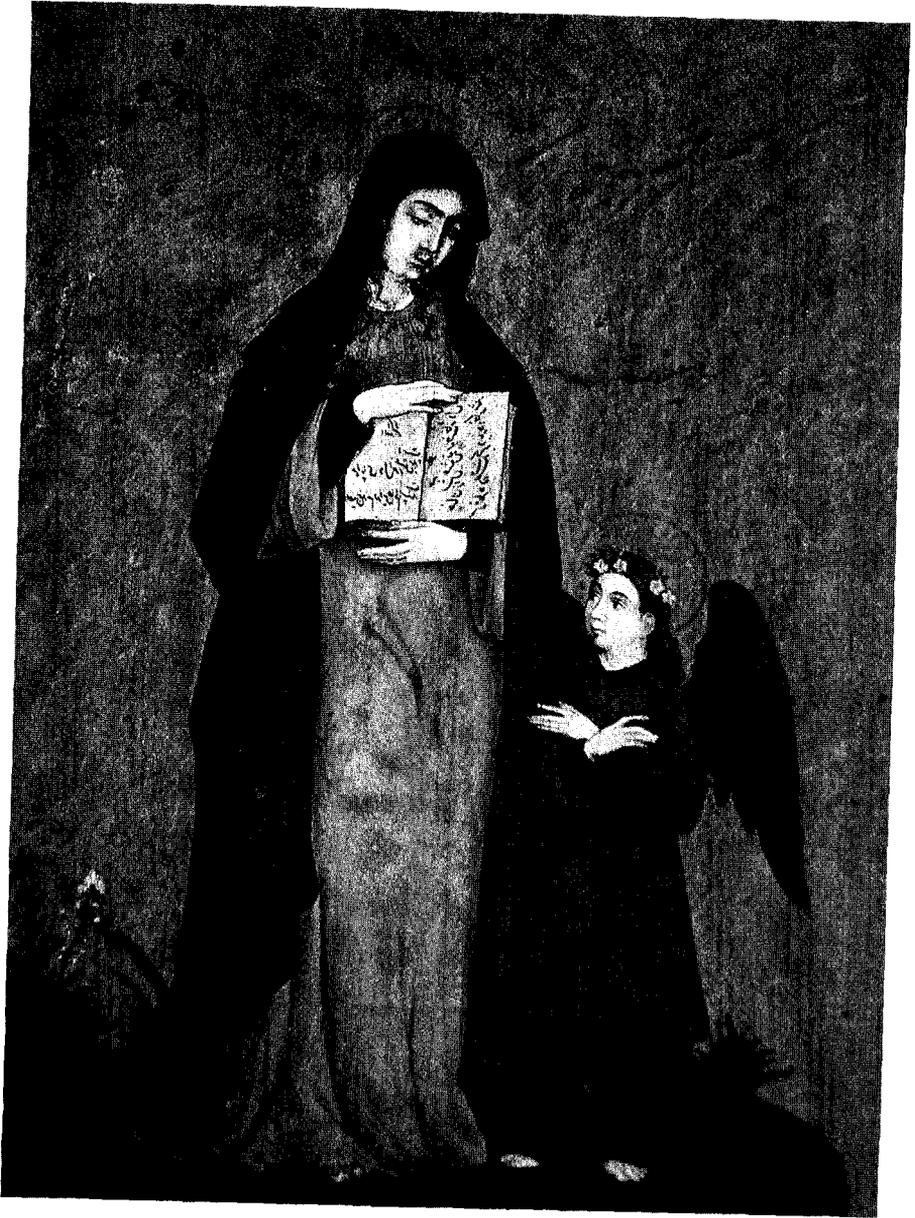


Figure 1. *The Virgin Mary Attended by Angel*, ca. 1610. Watercolors on paper, Mughal School, Lahore Museum, Lahore, Pakistan.

bol of divinely-guided kingship, and also proliferated in Mughal books, official decrees, statuary, and even jewelry. Although the context of these pictures in India was mainly Islamic and did not represent an inclination toward Catholicism, the same emperors allowed the Jesuits considerable freedom for their own proselytism. Consequently, in their mission bases of Agra, Lahore, and later Delhi, the Society of Jesus won many converts and succeeded in establishing a visible and influential presence in court life at the highest level. Catarina's early propensity for figural visions was probably strongly influenced by this climate.

Although most of the converts were lower-caste Hindus and poor Muslims, the royal court showed consistent interest in Jesuit activities and a number of high-ranking courtiers embraced Christianity. Whenever this happened it was duly recorded, for example when Father Manoel Pinheiro, writing from Lahore in 1601, lists among those baptized "Hua molher Chacatas casta propia del Rey seguindo o exemplo de sua may ia bautisada, se fes Xpa, repugnandão os parentes."²⁶ Could this have been Mirra's mother Borta? Ramos claimed that although Mirra's father never converted to Christianity, he was always sympathetic to it. This reflects an ancient tradition among higher-ranking Mongols of religious tolerance; many of the wives of the Great Mongols (1227-1294) were Christians, and Akbar himself brought up Christian nobles in his palace.²⁷ Mirra's father could quite easily have expressed sympathy for the Christian religion while remaining outwardly Muslim, as did Akbar himself.

After a childhood of vicissitudes, including a Moses-like rescue from a riverbank and an exile in a cave full of vipers to escape marriage to a Muslim, Mirra and her family fled around 1615 from the Mughal heartland to the sea—near Portuguese territories.²⁸ Ramos claims that they emigrated because

26. Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome, Goa 55, fol. 39a (1601) ["A Chaghatai woman, closely related to the King, [who] following the example of her mother, was baptized, declared herself Christian, and repudiated her family."]

27. J.J. Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquest*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 97; Edward Maclagan, *The Jesuits and the Great Mogul*, London, Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1932 (reprinted in New Delhi, Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 170-178. An extreme example of the Mongol tolerance for many religions is provided by the sultan of Greater Persia, Öljeitü (1304-1316), who at various times in his life was a Shamanist, Buddhist, Nestorian Christian, and Shi'i and Sunni Muslim; see David Morgan, *The Mongols*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and Oxford, Blackwell, 1986, pp. 158-161.

28. Ramos, *Primera parte de los prodigios...*, p. 9b.

of invasion by the “Turks,” but this is fantasy since neither the Ottomans (1281-1924) nor any other Turks invaded India in the seventeenth century. There was, however, a very good reason why a family with Christian sympathies would want to flee the Mughal court around that time. Between 1613 and 1615 the Mughals arrived at the brink of war with Portugal, following an incident in which a Portuguese ship captured one of the imperial ferries bound for Mecca.²⁹ In reprisal, the Mughal government shut down the Jesuit missions, persecuted the Christians, and sent the Portuguese inhabitants of Agra away from the capital. The Jesuit missionaries in Lahore fled that city to join the rest of their community. It is likely that Mirra’s family moved to Surat, the Mughals’ principal port, which had a large community of European traders and was near the Portuguese forts of Diu and Daman. Surat, however, was also a hive of piracy.³⁰

According to Castillo Grajeda, Mirra herself recounts how she was captured on the beach by the pirates who were later her means of reaching Manila, and by extension New Spain.³¹ Taken aboard their ship, she sojourned in the Portuguese South Indian enclave of Cochin long enough for the Jesuit mission there to baptize her as Catarina de San Juan. Portuguese records from the period confirm that the city of Cochin was severely troubled by pirates in the year 1616.³² Later on, Catarina continues, she was taken back onto the same pirate ship and transported amid great hardship to the slave-markets of Manila. Her long stay in the Philippines cannot have been very pleasant, despite Ramos’ colorful stories of the serenades of an enamored Japanese prince—converted by the Nagasaki mission of the Society of Jesus, of course—and her participation in joyous religious festivals.³³ In Manila she was said to have been sold to the viceroy of New Spain, the marquis of Galves, but was actually purchased by the Poblano captain

29. Maclagan, *op. cit.*, p. 82. Peace was finally negotiated with the help of the superior of the Jesuit missions, Jerome Xavier, whose signature is still on the treaty in Goa.

30. See John F. Richards, *The Cambridge History of India: The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1993, p. 241.

31. Castillo Grajeda, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-45.

32. “A cidade de Cochim se me queixou por suas cartas [...] do miseravel estado em que se achava e estavam seus moradores, dizendo que a tinha posto n’elle o ser tão perseguida, como era, dos rebeldes, que com roubos que lhe tinham feito no mar, a teem destruida, sem haver posses para lho defender [...]”: Academia Real das Sciencias, Lisbon, Documentos Remettidos de India ou Livros das Monções, III (1885), document no. 630, pp. 373-376.

33. De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan*..., p. 39.

Miguel de Sosa and Margarita de Cháves [sic], “los cuales,” in the hopeful words of Castillo Grajeda, “habían encargado a un su correspondiente una chinita para tenerla como a hija, por no haber tenido el fruto del matrimonio.”³⁴ She arrived in Acapulco in 1621, and was confirmed in the same year in Puebla by Bishop Alonso de la Mota y Escobar.

During her long life in Puebla, Catarina was promoted from slave to servant to anchorite, and was all the while visited increasingly by visions. She wore the simple black gown of an ascetic (figure 2)³⁵—certainly not a colorful and exotic Indian sari that might have influenced the modern china poblana costume—lived in a cell, and reportedly remained chaste even through a brief marriage to another Asian immigrant named Diego (died in 1644).³⁶ Despite the standard loathing for sexuality—which even led her to tell a vision of the naked Christ to put his clothes back on—many of her experiences had erotic overtones.³⁷ Her pious and quiet life contrasted with her spreading fame and boisterous visions, and except for a pilgrimage to a local shrine and her mystical bilocations, she never left the city again and rarely even left her cell.³⁸ At first she favored the church of San Francisco and had a Franciscan confessor, Fra Juan Baptista, but later she frequented the Jesuit church and took on Jesuit confessors.³⁹ She gained a reputation as a prophet, and foretold the deaths of several important people, including the Viceroy and Vicereine (the duke of Veragua in 1673 and the marquise of Mancera in 1674) as well as Bishop Escobar of Puebla.⁴⁰ Her only close friendship was with a fellow woman anchorite in Puebla, Sor María de Jesús Tomelín (1534-1637), who lived in the convent of the Inmaculada Concep-

34. Castillo Grajeda, op. cit., p. 45. As De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 61, points out, this was “una leyenda piadosa.”

35. Her only existing portrait, in Ramos’ account, shows her in the simple black garb of an anchorite. Castillo Grajeda, op. cit., pp. 53 and 122, writes, “Siempre gustó de vestidos humildes, modestos y pobres [...]. El manto con que modestamente se cubriría fué siempre el más grosero, el más tosco.”

36. Castillo Grajeda, op. cit., p. 62. When Diego attempted to claim his conjugal rights, St. Peter and St. Paul themselves appeared at the head of her bed to prevent him.

37. Christ appeared naked to her at his Resurrection and Catarina scolded him. “Si no vienes decentemente vestido, no te recibiré más”: Ramos, quoted in De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 8.

38. Castillo Grajeda, op. cit., p. 179.

39. Ibid., p. 62. She once saw her confessor, Juan Bautista, borne over a river by angels.

40. De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 102.



Figure 2. *La V. Catarina de S. Ioan Natural del Gn. Mogol*, 1690.

Drawn by Joseph Rs. Juene and engraved by Pedro de la Rosa, Puebla.

Taken from Ramos, *Segunda parte de los prodigios...* Photo: Ernesto Peñaloza, Archivo Fotográfico IIE-UNAM.

ción and who herself inspired several biographies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴¹

The Visions of Catarina de San Juan

If Hispanic Baroque art saw its fullest flowering on New Spanish soil, Toussaint contends, then it is no surprise that a viceregal mystic achieved in her visions the closest spectral equivalent to the Baroque ensemble.⁴² Like most of the great viceregal painters of her day, Catarina de San Juan expressed herself in two distinct styles: an austere and emotional manner inherited from Jusepe de Ribera (1588-1652) and Francisco de Zurbarán

41. *Ibid.*, p. 43, and Rogelio Ruiz Gomar, "La Eucaristía," in *Arte y mística...*, p. 214. Catarina also had a young disciple named Juana de Jesús María; see Carrasco Puente, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

42. Toussaint, *op. cit.*, p. 239. In general, viceregal mystics outshone their peninsular counterparts in the richness in imagery of their visions; see Vargaslugo, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

(1598-1664), and the brilliant, sensuous tonality—the “tonos dorados y matices otoñales”⁴³—of the great viceregal altarpieces of the late seventeenth century. Typically, the latter are crowded, bright, and lively, with a multiplicity of small figures blending in and out of clouds, sunbursts, and fire. Angels—archangels, cherubs, and winged cherub heads—are ubiquitous, often assuming a decorative role: “un apretado haz de cabezas de querubines que ruedan entre nubes, enseñando todas las fases posibles en sus rostros.”⁴⁴ Musical instruments, banners, and festive costumes lend the whole the atmosphere of a *fiesta*.

In keeping with—and sometimes surpassing⁴⁵—developments in viceregal painting, which was characterized by a spirit of triumphalism in the second half of the seventeenth century,⁴⁶ most of Catarina’s grandest compositions occurred in the years preceding her death in 1688. Catarina would have been familiar with several important works of viceregal painting of the period, including a number of works by Villalpando,⁴⁷ but her visions are far from merely derivative of contemporary painting. There is much that is original, even portentous in her descriptions; the question is who was first? The influence between visions and art was reciprocal in this period. Was Catarina derivative of the new church interiors of her city, were viceregal artists themselves moved by Catarina’s much-publicized visions,⁴⁸ or were both products of the same *Zeitgeist*? We may never know.

43. Manuel Toussaint, *Pintura colonial en México*, edited by Xavier Moysén, Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas), 1982 (first edition, 1965), p. 144.

44. Francisco de la Maza, *El pintor Cristóbal de Villalpando*, Mexico, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1964, p. 114.

45. As De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 87, remarks, “la lección de las pinturas y esculturas de las iglesias era superada por la ardiente imaginación de Catarina.”

46. José Guadalupe Victoria, “La iconografía del arte del siglo xvii,” in *El arte en tiempos de Juan Correa*, edited by María del Consuelo Maquivar, Tepotzotlán, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Museo Nacional del Virreinato), 1994 (hereafter, *El arte en tiempos...*), p. 139.

47. These include the *Transfiguration* (1683) in Puebla cathedral, among others; see De la Maza, *El pintor Cristóbal de Villalpando*, pp. 50 and 114-123.

48. Viceregal painters were occasionally inspired directly by mystical texts. Vargaslugo suggests, for example, that one of the works of Juan Correa was inspired directly by his reading of the writings of the Spanish mystic María de Jesús de Agreda; see Elisa Vargaslugo and José Guadalupe Victoria, *Juan Correa. Su vida y su obra*, Mexico, Universidad

Never stingy in her apparitions, Catarina beheld a bewildering number of saints, prophets, angels, and magi, including Jesus at every stage of his life, all of the images of the Virgin Mary in the Puebla region—not to mention the Virgins of Guadalupe, Loreto, *Salus Populi Romani*, and del Popolo—the full range of ascetics, martyrs, and all nine categories of angels.⁴⁹ Some Poblano images were especially prominent, such as the *facies Christi* in the altar of St. Ignatius in the church of the Compañía, which allegedly first appeared to her on the pirate ship en route to Cochin.⁵⁰ Her favorite of all, however, was the statue of Jesús Nazareno in the parish church of San José. She was so enamored of this figure, and so ardently desired a copy of it for herself, that one day Christ himself miraculously placed one in her hands.⁵¹ Although illiterate, Catarina was fond of listening to the lives of the saints and she collected devotional icons, including a small portrait of the Virgin of the Rosary, the drawing or painting of Jesús Nazareno, a small statue of the infant Jesus, and six engravings.⁵² She once remarked, tellingly, that she saw visions “como suelen representarse en pinturas.”⁵³

Catarina's most grandiose visions contain more than one scene at once, often dividing the action into temporal and celestial realms in the manner of current painting trends.⁵⁴ Once, while attending a service on Assumption

Nacional Autónoma de México (Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas), 1985-1991, vol. II, pp. 126-127.

49. De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan*..., pp. 35, 86, and 88. Vargaslugo, in Vargaslugo and Victoria, op. cit., vol. II, p. 19, remarks that, “Los ángeles son uno de los temas más representados por los pintores novohispanos.” Perhaps the crowning example of this taste for angels is the chapel of the Angels in Mexico City cathedral, whose three retablos include representations of all of the different angelic hierarchies. Look also at the impossibly crowded angelic hosts in the background of Villalpando's *Anunciación* (1706); see *Arte y mística*..., cat. no. 20, pp. 99-102. As Elizabeth Rhodes suggested to me, Catarina's elaborate categorization of angels may also reflect the influence of the writings of the Spanish mystic María de Escobar.

50. León, op. cit., p. 37.

51. Castillo Grajeda, op. cit., pp. 144-145.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 122 and 177. See also Catarina's last will and testament in Carrasco Puento, pp. 55-56.

53. Ramos, quoted in De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan*..., p. 35.

54. Following Counter-Reformation formulas and the style developed by the Sevillian school of painting, viceregal painters in the seventeenth century tended to divide their canvases into earthly and heavenly zones; see Rogelio Ruiz Gomar, “La pintura del periodo virreinal en México y Guatemala,” in *Pintura, escultura y artes útiles en Iberoamérica, 1500-1825*, edited

Day, Catarina was lifted into the air⁵⁵ by the Virgin and beheld the following tableau. Surrounded by grieving apostles and friends, the blessed soul of the Queen of Heaven rose among flames and rays of light from her immaculate and virginal body. She ascended into the celestial Jerusalem and took possession of her imperial throne, finally coming to rest in the arms of the Word Incarnate, her Spouse, and Only Son. Her head was crowned with twelve brilliant lights and she was adorned with splendid sunbeams as she mounted the moon.⁵⁶ Catarina watched as an infinite number of other souls followed the Virgin, as if they were seized by the brilliant threads that emanated from her lustrous attire.⁵⁷ Catarina's vision is a synthesis of imagery associated with the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, with an ancient tradition in art, but in an incarnation that was only echoed recently in painting. The Immaculate Conception in particular became a symbol of the triumphant church and of Habsburg Spain.

The Assumption of the Virgin was a very popular subject for large altar paintings in late-seventeenth century, and Catarina's vision is an amalgam of elements commonly found in them. An early example is an *Assumption* by Alonso López de Herrera (dead ca. 1654), which like Catarina's vision combines more than one stage of the story in a single picture.⁵⁸ In Herrera's work, the lower half of the image shows the twelve apostles and one soldier reacting in astonishment to her empty tomb, while in the upper half the Virgin, resplendent in sunbursts, is raised heavenward by adolescent angels accompanied by musical angels and putti. Nevertheless, the painting is rather Mannerist in style and is consequently less buoyant and crowded than

by Ramón Gutiérrez, Madrid, Cátedra, 1995 (Manuales de Arte), p. 114. For a discussion of this conceit see also Victor I. Stoichita, *Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art*, London, Reaktion Books, 1995, p. 28.

55. St. Teresa was also lifted into the air in some of her visions and this scene was occasionally depicted in viceregal painting, for example in *Elevación de Santa Teresa durante una misa* by Luis Juárez; see *Arte y mística...*, cat. no. 80, pp. 282-284.

56. As she is described in chapter 12 of the Apocalypse. See Stoichita, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-110.

57. Ramos, quoted in De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 87. See Stoichita, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-42, on the debate between those who believed that the Virgin's soul alone ascended into heaven and those who held that her body rose as well. Owing to this controversy, contemporary painters often cautiously avoided depicting the empty tomb, although the viceregal examples given here did so. Catarina's vision, however, clearly separates body from soul.

58. Toussaint, *Colonial Art...*, fig. 135, and Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, colorplate iv.



Figure 3. Altar de los Reyes with the *Assumption*, by Pedro García Ferrer (before 1649). Royal Chapel, Puebla cathedral. Photo: Pedro Ángeles, Archivo Fotográfico IIE-UNAM.

Catarina's vision. Another example, which Catarina would almost certainly have known, is the *Assumption* in the altar of the Kings in Puebla cathedral—before 1649—by Pedro García Ferrer (1583-1660) [figure 3].⁵⁹ García Ferrer's bright if rigid painting, however, represents only the final scene in Catarina's apparition. The Virgin is already in Heaven, and stands atop a full moon with the twelve stars around her head and sunbursts ringing her body. The *stellarium*, or ring of 12 stars around the Virgin's head, became common in Hispanic painting at the end of the seventeenth century, and the moon is a standard feature of *Immaculate Conception* imagery. Although souls do not grasp her raiments as in Catarina's account, multitudes of angels support her by holding onto her gown. Nearly identical in its composition, but more fluid and diffused with a softer light, is a later *Assumption*, in the chapel of the Rosario in Puebla—before 1690—by José Rodríguez Carnero (died in

59. Toussaint, *Colonial Art...*, fig. 379, and Francisco Pérez Salazar and Elisa Vargaslugo, *Historia de la pintura en Puebla*, Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1963, plate 12.

1725), itself probably inspired by García Ferrer's painting.⁶⁰ Its blurred edges and luminosity bring it closer in spirit to Catarina's ethereal vision.

It is fitting that Catarina's apparition finds its closest match in a work by Juan Correa: "el lienzo mariano más hermoso e importante que se pintó en la Nueva España del siglo XVIII."⁶¹ Completed one year after Catarina's death, Correa's magnificent *Assumption*, in the sacristy of Mexico City cathedral (1689), is the fullest visual approximation of Catarina's miraculous experience (figure 4).⁶² Here we have all three stages recorded by the anchorite blended seamlessly into one kinetic scene. Below, the apostles and multitudes of "friends" gather around the open tomb—a scene derived from the Apocrypha, which record that multitudes were present to witness the miracle.⁶³ Meanwhile, the Virgin ascends heavenwards on the arms of a throng of angels and at the top Christ steps forward from his throne to receive her open-armed. This latter motif is a reference on both Correa's and Catarina's part to an Old Testament prophecy (Kings 1: 2, 19) in which Solomon receives his mother and seats her in a throne by his side.⁶⁴ Correa's impressionistic brushstrokes, which allow the figures to blend into each other and lend the whole painting a glittering brilliance, closely echoes the mood of the vision. Still, elements from Catarina's vision are missing. The Virgin does not stand on the moon, for example, and the stars around her head have been replaced by cherub heads.

One feature of Catarina's apparition is absent from all of these paintings. The image of the souls being drawn heavenward by rays of light emanating like threads from the Virgin's clothing—although suggested perhaps by the angels clinging to her gown—does not appear in any paintings of the

60. *Ibid.*, fig. 23; De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, pp. 38-41, and Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, p. 114.

61. Elisa Vargaslugo, "La mística en la vida de María," in *Arte y mística...*, p. 86.

62. Toussaint, *Colonial Art...*, fig. 223; Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, p. 141; Marcus Burke, *Pintura y escultura en Nueva España: el barroco*, Mexico, Azabache, 1992, pp. 108-109, and Vargaslugo and Victoria, *op. cit.*, vol. II, cat. no. II.33. Another example which blends together the two scenes even more effectively is the now destroyed canvas by Juan Correa from the nave of Mexico City cathedral; *ibid.*, vol. II, cat. no. XIII.2. Later Poblano paintings were to capture the spirit of her vision even more vividly, for example, two eighteenth-century works by Miguel Gerónimo Zendejas, in Pérez Salazar and Vargaslugo, *op. cit.*, figs. 45-46.

63. Manuel González Galván, "Singularidades iconográficas en la obra de Juan Correa," in *El arte en tiempos...*, p. 148.

64. *Ibid.*

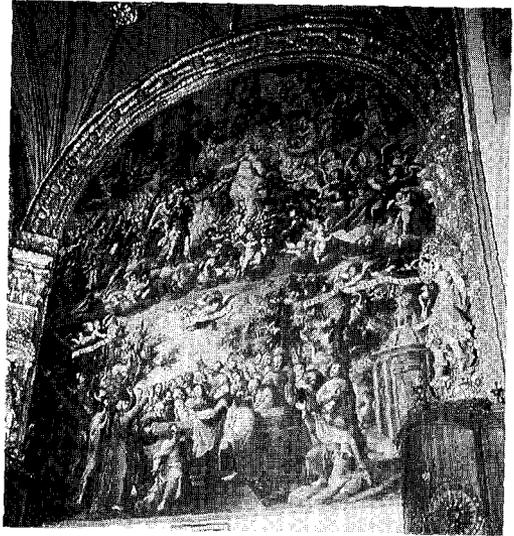


Figure 4. Juan Correa,
Assumption of the Virgin.
Oil painting on canvas,
Sacristy, Mexico City cathedral.
Photo: Elisa Vargaslugo,
Archivo Fotográfico IIE-UNAM.

Assumption. But a very similar motif does occur elsewhere in viceregal painting. Several canvases survive of an *Allegory of Souls in Purgatory*, which depict various saints lowering their belts or cords into Purgatory to rescue souls in torment.⁶⁵ Often commissioned by confraternities, one example (ca. 1677), by Antonio Rodríguez,⁶⁶ features the patron saints of four religious orders. By grasping onto these lines of salvation, the naked souls raise themselves toward heaven. The comparison of the Virgin's raiments to rays of light is echoed in chapter 12 of the *Apocalypse*, in which she is described as wearing "the sun for her mantle."⁶⁷

Ramos remarks—unfairly—that Catarina started to have her most extravagant visions only after the new gilding had been completed inside the Jesuit church of the *Compañía* in the 1670s, implying that her experiences were mere reflections of Jesuit art and therefore entirely derivative.⁶⁸ The unorthodox and ephemeral nature of Catarina's visions, however, defy any

65. Juan Correa painted several of these, which apparently derived from a single engraving; see Vargaslugo and Victoria, *op. cit.*, vol. II, cat. nos. IX.1, IX.2, IX.3, and IX.5. The saints included St. Francis, St. Anthony, St. Rose of Lima, and St. Nicholas of Tolentino.

66. Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, p. 112, and plate 178.

67. See Stoichita, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

68. De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 117.

attempt to reconstruct the exact appearance of these lost decorations (the church was rebuilt in 1767) on the basis of her texts, despite their use of many contemporary painting conventions. The following is an example. One day, during a special service, the vaults of the Compañía church were suddenly illuminated by a brilliant explosion. The heights of the central nave burst open in an ocean of light ringed by a spacious “crown” of angels, arranged with perfect deportment and symmetry. In their midst floated a magical table adorned with precious cloths, both white and embroidered with fantastic patterns, everything sprinkled with flowers and gold flakes. The feast displayed on the table was compellingly sweet and inviting. Christ himself occupied the main seat, and reaching toward her he lovingly invited Catarina to join him at table.⁶⁹ Despite its Baroque *bravura*, Catarina’s image possesses a direct and personal emotive power—Jesus, after all, appeared to her as her spouse in several visions—that is very different from the universal and celebratory nature of the large-scale paintings of the day.

If this apparition is inspired by any specific painting, it would likely have been a Last Supper, but this theme tended to be represented in interiors with the table set firmly on the ground. There is also a painting by Pedro Ramírez (active 1650-1678), *Jesus Assisted by the Angels* (1656), which depicts Christ seated alone at a table surrounded by angels and shares the spirit of Catarina’s vision, but the table, again, is set on *terra firma*—this time in front of a landscape—and it is shown with only a modest sampling of food as a symbol of Christ’s moderation and mortification of the senses.⁷⁰ A less likely inspiration is the Circumcision, which also centers around a table and often features the monogram of Christ encircled in a ring of angels. The Circumcision was a very important theme for the Society of Jesus because it represented the moment when Jesus was given his name, and was often used for Jesuit high altars.⁷¹ Rings of angels were also commonly painted around the dove of the Holy Spirit, for example in *The Vision of St. Teresa*, by Villalpan-

69. Castillo Grajeda, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-88.

70. Diego Angulo Íñiguez, *Historia del arte hispanoamericano*, Barcelona, Salvat, 1950, vol. II, fig. 378; Toussaint, *Colonial Art...*, plate 218, p. 230; Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, plates 167-168, and *Arte y mística...*, cat. no. 4, p. 56. For a reference to the Last Supper in viceregal painting, see Victoria, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

71. Howard Hibbard, “Ut picturæ sermones: The First Painted Decorations of the Gesù,” in *Baroque Art: The Jesuit Contribution*, edited by Rudolf Wittkower and Irma B. Jaffe, New York, Fordham University, 1972, p. 32. See also Jonathan Brown, *Images and Ideas in Seven-*

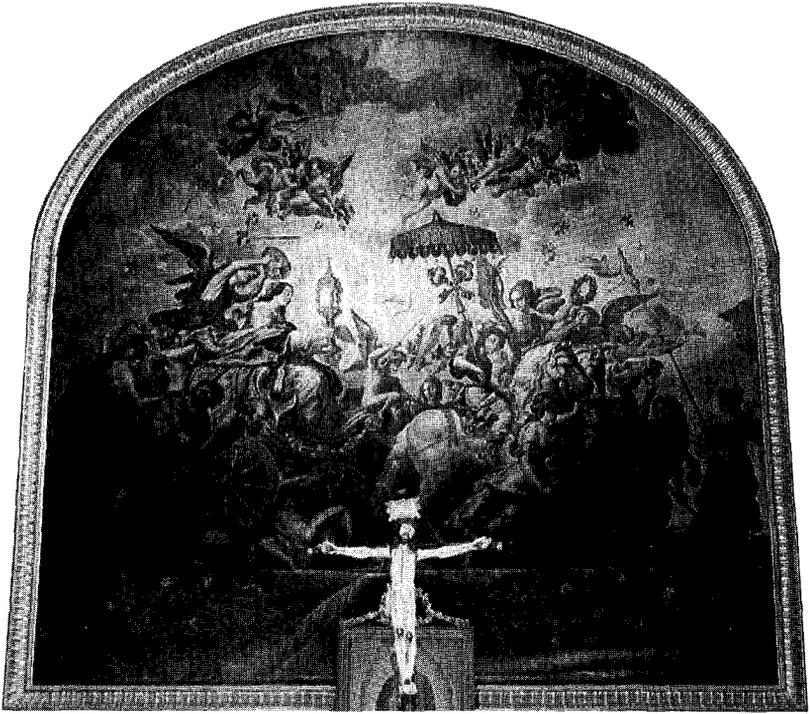


Figure 5. Baltasar de Echave Rioja, *The Triumph of the Church and the Eucharist*, 1675. Oil painting on wood panel, Sacristy, Puebla cathedral. Photo: Pedro Cuevas, Archivo Fotográfico IIE-UNAM.

do, in the church of the Profesa in Mexico City.⁷² The richly embroidered cloths sprinkled with flowers can be found on many contemporary paintings, for example *The Triumph of the Church and Eucharist*—after Rubens—by Baltasar de Echave y Rioja (1675) [figure 5] in the sacristy of Puebla cathedral (which Catarina may well have known) and Villalpando's *Allegory of the Church* (1685) in the sacristy of Mexico City cathedral.⁷³

teenth-Century Spanish Painting, Princeton, Princeton University, 1978, plate I by Juan de las Roelas.

72. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

73. Toussaint, *Colonial Art...*, fig. 226; Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, plate 248, and Burke, *op. cit.*, pp. 63 and 111.

Other illuministic visions experienced in the same church are similarly unique or vague. In fact, many of her phantasms verge on the aniconic—like the sheets of silver and gleams of light in pre-Columbian Andean ecstasies—and are almost antithetical to the figural nature of Catholic imagery, which by the later seventeenth century “llevaba su antropomorfismo a un estado elemental, casi simbólico.”⁷⁴ She frequently saw flickering angelic faces in the altar candles. At other times a crystalline white light revealed mere suggestions of winged putti wearing diadems or crowns.⁷⁵ Often when the host was elevated in church she would see it transform into a sun, fire, or star, and sometimes its magical rays would penetrate her mouth.⁷⁶ According to Ramos, one of these visions took place in front of the new high altar of the Jesuit church soon after its consecration in 1675.⁷⁷ A blinding explosion of light rays burst from the center of an arched opening in the retablo. Is this evidence, perhaps, of a monogram of Christ enclosed in a crown of light rays and therefore a Circumcision? Again, Catarina’s vision is too fleeting to allow a definite answer.

Another—much earlier—apparition in the Compañía church is embodied more directly in an actual painting, but one that was not finished until many years afterward, at the time of Catarina’s death. When her dear friend and mentor Sor María de Jesús was on her deathbed in 1637, Catarina ran desperately into the Compañía church and threw herself in grief before the image of the *Virgen del Popolo*.⁷⁸ Suddenly, she noticed a flash of light at the far end of the nave behind the high altar which illuminated the vaults and domes of the church, filling them with throngs of angels. There she saw crowds of angels lower Sor María into the church, and place her with the greatest reverence and dignity onto the middle of the main altar platform. Opening the tabernacle, her celestial assistants administered the Last Rites to her, raising the host up high. Upon finishing the Eucharist, the holy woman

74. Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, p. 137. For a discussion of pre-Conquest Andean visions, see Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes*, Princeton, Princeton University, 1991, p. 328.

75. Ramos, quoted in Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 116.

76. De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 75.

77. Ramos, quoted in De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 117.

78. The motif of icons causing visions has a long tradition in the literature; see Stoichita, *op. cit.*, p. 143. Sor María’s own biographers relate another miraculous communion which occurred while the woman was kneeling in prayer during a mass in which the abbess had forbidden her to participate; see Ruiz Gomar, “La Eucaristía,” p. 214.

was borne aloft again in the arms of the angels, and was returned once more to her bed.⁷⁹ The scene reflects the expanded role of the Eucharist as a theme in viceregal painting in the seventeenth century, and also echoes a famous vision of María de Agreda, who witnessed the Virgin Mary receiving Communion at the hands of the angel Gabriel.⁸⁰ Although it was rare in viceregal painting, two paintings of the subject by Juan Correa survive, which are reminiscent of Catarina's vision but with a far smaller cast.⁸¹

But this vision most strongly recalls Villalpando's masterpiece in the "royal" chapel of Puebla cathedral, *Virgin in Glory* (1688-1689) [figure 6]. The only painted dome interior in New Spain,⁸² Villalpando's work depicts a shimmering empyrean of angels and cherub heads which centers on a monstrance held by the Virgin flanked by two angels, with much the same composition as Sor María and the angels in Catarina's ecstasy. Villalpando's angels mimic in paint the heavenly creatures that actually populated the nave vault in Catarina's mind, and he employs the actual light of the lantern in a way that further confuses nature with art. Did Catarina's apparition of 1676 herald Villalpando's painting of 1688-1689?

The most original and lyrical of Catarina's visions use vapors, clouds, smoke, and flowers to depict abstract concepts such as prayer and salvation. Like her visions of lights and candles, these are also aniconic in spirit.⁸³ One day, while praying for a soul, she suddenly saw a fantastic staircase appear a short distance away. Rising from earth to heaven, this Jacob's ladder was composed entirely of gossamer clouds. Catarina watched in wonder as the

79. Castillo Grajeda, op. cit., p. 57.

80. Victoria, op. cit., pp. 130-40.

81. Vargaslugo and Victoria, op. cit., vol. II, cat. nos. II.37 and IX.6, and *Arte y mística...*, cat. no. 22.

82. Clara Bargellini, "The Dome: Between Renaissance and Baroque in New Spain," paper delivered at the conference "Cultural Transmission and Transformation in the Ibero-American World, 1200-1800," Virginia Tech., Blacksburg (Virginia), October 21-25, 1995. See also De la Maza, *El pintor Cristóbal de Villalpando*, pp. 101-106.

83. By an interesting coincidence, traditional Andean religion conceived of sacrificial smoke as a form of prayer, and this notion was preserved in the postconquest period by the chronicler and artist Guaman Poma de Ayala, who actually depicted the prayers of Christian penitents in the form of smoke in his *Crónica* of 1615; see MacCormack, op. cit., figs. 18-19. John of the Cross, whose visions have been described as aniconic, considered clouds to be the only substance and tangible aspect of his visions, although their function was as a barrier to conceal the divine; see Stoichita, op. cit., p. 86.



Figure 6. Cristóbal de Villalpando, *Virgin in Glory*, 1688-1689 (detail). Mural painting, Royal Chapel, Puebla.

soul for whom she was praying climbed each perfect step and bid this world good-bye as it was received in the next.⁸⁴ On some occasions, while praying in church, she was astonished to see her prayers take on the form of vapors which rose into the vaults and transformed into clouds populated with multitudes of angels and saints. At other times she would see heaven respond to her prayers by showering flowers down from the ceiling, “simbolizando el delicioso jardín de virtudes que adornaban su dichosa alma.”⁸⁵

Catarina’s vaporous images have no exact equivalent in contemporary painting, although some similar conventions were used to adorn saints’ visions. For example, in a scene of a vision of Saint Rose of Lime by Nicolás Correa (ca. 1691), the saint is shown experiencing a figural apparition ringed with clouds and mist—an ancient tradition in Christian painting with origins in scripture (figure 7).⁸⁶ But the distinction is important, since the

84. Castillo Grajeda, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-136.

85. Ramos, quoted in De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 55.

86. Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, plate 233. On the motif of clouds framing visions, see Stoichita, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-89.



Figure 7. Nicolás Correa, *Vision of St. Rose of Lima*, ca. 1691. Oil painting on canvas. Photo: E.P., Archivo Fotográfico IIE-UNAM.

vapors serve simply as a frame accentuating the separation of the human and the divine—“a diaphragm-like object whose role is to relativize the actual visibility of the event”⁸⁷—and do not themselves represent an abstract concept. The use of scattered flowers to denote God’s grace, on the other hand, does appear often in paintings, for example José Juárez’ *SS Justus and Pastor* (1658), or Villalpando’s *The Marriage of the Virgin* (late seventeenth century).⁸⁸ Although it is made of wood and not clouds, a Jacob’s ladder depicting angels climbing to heaven is included among Juan Correa’s panels in the chapel of the Angels in Mexico City cathedral.⁸⁹

Catarina’s most elaborate visions took place outdoors, often in the form of demonic *fiestas*, inspired by her dislike of the church festivities—*villancicos*, *loas*, *autos sacramentales*, and *pastorelas*—that proliferated in seventeenth-

87. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

88. Toussaint, *Colonial Art...*, fig. 216; Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, colorplate XI and plates 257 and 261, and Burke, *op. cit.*, pp. 47 and 48.

89. Vargaslugo and Victoria, *op. cit.*, vol. II, cat. no. 1.3.b. A popular mystical work of the period was San Juan Climaco’s *Escala espiritual*: see Vargaslugo, “Mística y pintura...,” in *Arte y mística...*, p. 34.

century New Spain.⁹⁰ One of the most substantial of her frequent sightings of angels battling devils⁹¹ took place on the road to the sanctuary of Cosama-loapan, where she went on pilgrimage with her husband Diego sometime before 1644. Coming onto a clearing, Catarina and Diego encountered legions of devils and ferocious animals blocking their way—a nightmare ascribable also perhaps to her hatred of travel. Just when she was about to despair, “millions” of angels appeared to rescue the hapless pilgrims. They watched in wonder as the angels advanced over the plain in a handsome display, divided into an infinite number of troops. Arriving at the scene of battle, they rose as if on wings and assembled at the mouths of the canyons, giving assurance that they would guard the pilgrims against the wicked onslaught. Other angels blocked the valleys and halted the advance of the beast.⁹² At the time of her vision, Catarina would probably only have seen paintings showing individual angels battling devils such as the *St. Michael* by Alonso Vásquez (early seventeenth century).⁹³ Villalpando completed his astonishing *The Woman of the Apocalypse* (figure 8) before 1689, whose ranks of armed angels and horrifying seven-headed hydra battling on the plains immediately evoke Catarina’s description.⁹⁴ Wielding spears and swords, the celestial force is led to victory by St. Michael who blocks the entrance to the canyon and stops the hydra in its tracks. The scene above, showing the Virgin astride the moon, echoes Catarina’s vision of the Assumption.

A similar apparition also calls to mind the work of Villalpando. One day, by means of “enigmas and mysteries,” Catarina witnessed the sacking of the city of Veracruz by the pirate Lorencillo. In the midst of the plaza she could see men dragging carts bursting with silver and other spoils out of the city

90. On the form and development of viceregal music and theatricals, see Paz, *op. cit.*, pp. 309-325.

91. Catarina’s propensity for angelic visions and her apparitions of angelic armies battling demons have many precedents, for example in the ecstasies of Sor María de Santo Domingo (ca. 1470-1524), Sor María de Jesús de Agreda (1602-65), and Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1302), who saw legions of angels directed by the Virgin Mary herself; see Mary E. Giles, *The Book of Prayer of Sor María de Santo Domingo*, Albany (New York), Suny, 1990, p. 21; Clark Colahan, *The Visions of Sor María de Agreda*, Tucson, University of Arizona, 1994, p. 1; Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1995, pp. 163-164, and De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 88.

92. Ramos, quoted in De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, pp. 66-67.

93. Toussaint, *Colonial Art...*, fig. 134, and Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, plate 105.

94. See Toussaint, *Colonial Art...*, fig. 225, and Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 112.



Figure 8. Cristóbal de Villalpando, *The Woman of the Apocalypse*, 1685. Oil on wood panel, Sacristy, Mexico City cathedral. Photo: Fomento Cultural Banamex (hereafter, FCB).

Another melancholy apparition took place during one of Catarina's frequent prayers for souls in Purgatory. She was swept off the ground and carried to a dark and dreary dungeon which emitted an unbearable stench. Inside she beheld the king of a foreign land, seated on a stump and garbed in ashen rags. In his hand he held a scepter and on his head he wore a crown, but from head to toe he was covered with a swarm of flies.⁹⁹ The vision itself is horrifying and unique, but Catarina may have seen paintings depicting saints such as Teresa praying for sinners, some of which gave glimpses of the horrors of Purgatory. One example is *St. Teresa Praying for Souls in Purgatory*, attributed to Luis Juárez (seventeenth century), at Tepotzotlán.¹⁰⁰ Her vision is also, ironically, reminiscent of a Man of Sorrows.

I have already mentioned how Christ approached Catarina naked in her bedroom and asked her to come to him as his spiritual spouse. She also had other visions with sexual overtones involving devotional images in the city. During the Eucharist, as we have seen above, Christ's body often miraculously entered her mouth. Similarly, the Nazareno Christ that we have already seen displaying his wounds for her would also penetrate her bosom with a ray of light from his heart. Sometimes he would leave her his mantle to sleep in, signifying their spiritual nuptials. A painting of Christ crucified in her master's private chapel sweated blood for her, which she lovingly mopped up with a white cloth. As well as appearing as her spouse, Jesus would sometimes come as a small child for her to dandle, reminiscent of Saint Rose of Lima.¹⁰¹ Both the *Virgen del Popolo* at the Compañía church and *Nuestra Señora del Socorro* at the convent of Saint Catharine of Siena offered her "the sweet nectar of [their] breasts" to comfort her in times of pain, although such images probably had more to do with nourishment and motherhood than sexuality.¹⁰²

99. Castillo Grajeda, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105.

100. *Pintura novohispana. Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán*, catalogue, essays by Jorge Alberto Manrique, Elisa Vargaslugo, José Guadalupe Victoria, Rogelio Ruiz Gomar, Ma. del Rosario García de Toxquí, Armida Alonso Lutteroth, and Roberto M. Alarcón Cedillo, Tepotzotlán (Mexico), Asociación de Amigos del Museo Nacional del Virreinato, 1992-1994, vol. 1, p. 158.

101. Castillo Grajeda, *op. cit.*, p. 61, and De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, pp. 53 and 70. Her dandling of the infant Jesus is strongly reminiscent of St. Rose of Lima (1586-1617), the only New World saint of the colonial period.

102. Castillo Grajeda, *op. cit.*, p. 111, and De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 55. Breasts were not always considered sexual in this period. Sor Alfonsa de San Pedro, another

Such apparitions are part and parcel of seventeenth-century mysticism with origins in the Middle Ages,¹⁰³ and images of the tamer of these experiences proliferated in Mexican viceregal painting. Mystical marriage scenes were quite common, such as Villalpando's *Nuptials of the Virgin* and *Mystical Marriage of St. Rose of Lima*, the latter showing the adult saint receiving the ring from a child Jesus.¹⁰⁴ Images of saints drinking the blood of Christ and the milk of Mary were also fairly common, as in a remarkable painting by Antonio Rodríguez showing St. Augustine drinking both at once.¹⁰⁵ Depictions of St. Teresa of Ávila being pierced by the sun's rays include Alonso López de Herrera's *St. Teresa of Jesus* (seventeenth century) and a *Vision of St. Teresa* by Villalpando which shows Christ and the Virgin Mary laying a mantle on the saint's shoulders.¹⁰⁶

Finally, I would like to include one other kind of vision, which relates to the seventeenth-century craze for atlases, maps, and geography. On several

Poblana mystic of Catarina's time, also drank milk from the Virgin's breasts; see Rogelio Ruiz Gomar, "Éxtasis y visiones," in *Arte y mística...*, p. 240.

103. Even in the Middle Ages the thirteenth-century beguine Hadewijch of Antwerp wrote poetry laced with erotic Christ imagery, including the motif of the "eating of Christ" which we have observed in Catarina's visions, and which was also employed by Sor María de Jesús de Agreda and Sor María de Santo Domingo: see Jantzen, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-146; De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, p. 72, and Giles, *op. cit.*, p. 26. The Spanish nun Josefa Menéndez recorded deeply erotic conversations with Christ in her Jesuit-sponsored autobiography; see De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, pp. 70-71. Like Catarina, Gertrude of Helfta also drank the blood of Christ directly from his wounds, as is depicted in a fourteenth-century miniature, as did Catarina's namesake Catherine of Siena (ca. 1347-1380); see Jantzen, *op. cit.*, pp. 210 and 219. Christ sweated blood for St. Rose of Lima, and many Baroque-era religious were favored with lactating images of the Virgin Mary; see F.M. Capes, *The Flower of the New World, Being a Short History of St. Rose of Lima*, London, Benziger Bros., 1899, p. 170. The prize for the extremest example of religio-erotic behavior belongs to Sor María de Santo Domingo, who often would experience ecstasies only after her male confessor and other churchmen would spend the night on her bed with her, frequently embracing her and even lying on top of her body; see Giles, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

104. Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, plates 257 and 261, and Cambios: *The Spirit of Transformation in Spanish Colonial Art*, edited by Gabrielle Palmer and Donna Pierce, Albuquerque, Santa Barbara Museum of Art-University of New Mexico, 1992, cat. no. 59. A letter of recommendation at the beginning of the second volume of Ramos' work by Joseph Vidal, s.i., directly compares Catarina to St. Teresa; see Ramos, *Segunda parte de los prodigios...*, p. II.

105. Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, plate 176, and *Arte y mística...*, cat. no. 71.

106. Toussaint, *Pintura colonial...*, plate 112. For other depictions of the Transverberation of St. Teresa, see *Arte y mística...*, cat. nos. 77 and 78.

occasions, especially toward the end of her life when she was bedridden, Catarina made spiritual journeys through the air and viewed the width and breadth of the earth. Her more restrained air travel took her on tours of the churches of Puebla, so that she could receive the Eucharist and attend services from the comfort of her own cell.¹⁰⁷ The consummate “arm-chair traveler,” Catarina also undertook long-distance voyages to the nations of the Americas and Asia.¹⁰⁸ Her Asian trips were noted down in great detail by an enthusiastic Ramos, who made sure to point out that it was Jesuit enterprise that allowed for the Christian conversions she witnessed among the kings of Japan, India, and China. Her reports were full of Christian hope. At her cruising altitude tens of thousands of feet above the ground, Catarina saw “los parajes, las tierras, las nuevas conversiones, el modo de fabricar las casas y las chozas, el traje de los indios y las señas de los misioneros [...]”¹⁰⁹ and

Corrió finalmente con su entender, y conocimiento infuso, en estos días, muchas Ciudades, Provincias, y Reynos del Oriente, distinguiendo las tierras pertenecientes á la China, Tartaria, y de los Reinos de el Japon; los del Mogor [the Mughals], de la Arabia, é India; señalando, y midiendo la longitud, y distancia de unas, y otras Monarquias.¹¹⁰

107. “Dos meses antes de su muerte fué llevada por ministerio de ángeles a diversas iglesias a oír misa los más días de fiesta y algunos de trabajo dando las señas de los sacerdotes que las celebraban y de las partes donde la ponían a oír. En especial fué al convento del Seráfico Padre San Francisco, a la Iglesia del Santo Angel de la Guarda, y muchas veces oyó dichas misas desde su cama en la iglesia del Espíritu Santo, haciéndosele todo visible [...]”: Castillo Grajeda, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

108. Catarina was not the only mystic who had “arm-chair travel” experiences. The Spanish ecstatic Sor María de Jesús de Agreda was known as a “miraculous missionary” because of her frequent bilocations to Texas and New Mexico where she worked among the indians without ever leaving her cell in Spain. Like Catarina, she also experienced bird’s-eye views of the nations of the world and the heavens, and even wrote a fanciful atlas based on her travels. Sor María de Santo Domingo had frequent prophesies heralding pagan converts, including one in which 90 000 Moors were to embrace Christianity, and St. Rose of Lime experienced similar affirmations of Christian hope; see Giles, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33; Capes, *op. cit.*, p. 123, and Colahan, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 10, and 20-28.

109. Castillo Grajeda, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

110. Ramos, *Segunda parte de los prodigios...*, p. 159; see also pp. 173ff. Ramos dates this experience to the 1680s.

Not satisfied with terrestrial travel, Catarina even ascended—on Christ's arm, no less—into heaven itself.¹¹¹

Conclusion:

Catarina and Feminine Mysticism

Catarina was a woman of prodigal visions, straining against the boundaries of permissibility even in an era when mystical excess was not unusual.¹¹² Her miracles thronged with extras, her love for Christ was so physical and intimate that it verged on the blasphemous, and her prophetic abilities tried the tolerance of a conservative church establishment. It is no surprise that she was suppressed. As early as 1691, the Inquisition prohibited all engravings of Catarina on the charges that her image was treated with more respect than those of real saints, and that a ray of light was shown emitting from Christ and entering her breast.¹¹³ In 1696, Ramos' tract—and by extension all other biographies—was condemned as devilish witchery, an action which caused the elderly Jesuit to go out of his mind (he was already an alcoholic) and spend his last days in an asylum, where he was last heard of trying to murder his replacement as rector of the college.¹¹⁴ Tragically, as with so many women visionaries of her day, Catarina had not been condemned directly for her own actions but because of those of her promoters. Her fate was sealed by the exaggerations of her male confessor who used her as a spokeswoman

111. Castillo Grajeda, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

112. Scholars have shown that while church government and the interpretation of scripture remained male prerogatives, more and more women had recourse to mysticism as a direct access to God, giving them a medium and voice of their own; see Jantzen, *op. cit.*, pp. 1 and 68.

113. The following are excerpts from the decisions of the Inquisition, October 7, 1690: "[...] retrato de la Venerable Catherina este por las circunstancias que contiene en la estampa de estar enzima de un Santo como S. Geronimo y de estar con un Jesus a la vista de donde salen razos [...] que miran al Corazon de la Venerable Catharina [...]" (quoted in Bolaños Montiel, *op. cit.*, p. 104). And 1691: "a más de la postura y forma de dichas estampas del retrato de la susodicha [Catarina] [...] con insignias o señales de bienaventurada, como son los rayos que salen del Jesús, que están en dichas estampas, guiados al retrato y pecho de dicha Catarina de San Juan [...]" (Mauricio González de la Garza, *De Puebla los fulgores*, Puebla, Océano, 1995, p. 81.)

114. De la Maza, *Catarina de San Juan...*, pp. 136-137.

for the Society of Jesus and an advertisement for the city of Puebla, and who almost certainly published these private experiences without her knowledge or against her will.¹¹⁵ A sign of the times, these decrees by the Inquisition coincided with the silencing of a much more famous religious woman in New Spain—the 1694 abjuration and abandonment of “Humane Studies” by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.¹¹⁶

Although Catarina’s ecstasies were part of a long tradition of feminine mysticism, they were uniquely visual. She was in her own way an artist—we might call her a performance artist—of the Mexican Baroque, and worthy of being included among the more illustrious figures of her age. Although not literate and learned like the aristocratic Sor Juana, she nevertheless had a artist’s vision, and many of the descriptions of her ecstasies read like poetry. Like the great artists of her day, she borrowed ideas from existing works but at the same time she made original and perhaps influential contributions to the brilliant and complex *conjunto* that characterizes the style we call Baroque. †

115. Recent scholarship has shown that even the women’s own narratives, whether written or spoken, were increasingly controlled and doctored by male confessors like Ramos, who made their texts “serve not the female subject, but the male, all while appearing to be nothing less than the woman’s own testimony of her existence on earth”: Elizabeth Rhodes, “Women on their Knees: Female Religious Life Stories and the Parameters of Pornography,” unpublished paper, 1996, p. 3. I would like to thank Dr. Rhodes for directing me to much of the literature on female mystics in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain.

116. Paz, *op. cit.*, pp. 461 ff.

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