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# P R E F A C E

Art history often travels well-trodden paths, following traditional routes that shape our understanding of the past. When it comes to household names, such as Diego Velázquez and Michelangelo Buonarroti, these routes have typically been anchored by the concept of the ‘genius’ and the recognition of the extraordinary talent of individual artists. While valuable, this perspective tends to decontextualise works of art, considering them only in relation to their creators’ biographies and detaching them from broader cultural, artistic, and intellectual currents.

This exhibition proposes a different approach. We aim to weave together a narrative that reaches beyond the familiar, looking at connections between artists, patrons, and objects. Such connections are less obvious, or perhaps have been overlooked altogether. By rediscovering these threads, we are not only expanding the story of each work but also bringing them together in a dialogue that transcends time, geography, and context.

It is a profound pleasure and unique privilege to be able to do so by focusing on two undisputable masterpieces: Velázquez’s *Portrait of Mother Jerónima de la Fuente* from the collection of the Araoz family in Madrid, and a recently rediscovered, exquisite cast of a bronze crucifix modelled by Michelangelo. It is rare for a two-object exhibition to produce such a wealth of stimulating considerations, and the incredible stories these objects allow us to tell are a testimony to their artistic and cultural value.



Velázquez’s painting and Michelangelo’s sculpture are exceptional works in their own right. Taken together, they tell a tale of artistic influence, spiritual resonance, and cultural exchange that is deeply linked to the life of two extraordinary early modern women: the Roman mystical poet and patron Vittoria Colonna, and the Spanish nun Jerónima de la Fuente. Their achievements, much like the masterpieces of the two artists who respectively met these women, deserve to be explored and celebrated.

To present these works together is a deeply moving experience. It is my hope that this exhibition will inspire conversations, spark curiosity, and offer fresh perspectives on the way in which we appreciate, value, discuss, and acquire art.

**STUART LOCHHEAD**







After a model by Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Christ on the Cross*, cast c. 1560-70, bronze, height: 25 cm, Eindhoven, IOMR Collection.

# I N T R O D U C T I O N

This book examines the cultural and artistic connections between Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Mother Jerónima de la Fuente* from the Araoz collection in Madrid and the design of a bronze crucifix produced by Michelangelo in Rome in the last thirty years of his life. It considers each object's biography – their conception history, intended destination, use, their later travels and shifts in meaning – focusing on notions of spirituality, devotion, and artistic influence across Europe, the Americas, and Asia. The three chapters that follow provide an analysis of how these two masterpieces interacted, moving westward, as it were, from Rome, to Seville, to Manila.

Chapter 1 focuses on Rome, the leading centre of the Catholic Church's spirituality in the Renaissance. The chapter traces how Michelangelo's profound meditations on the Passion of Christ were shaped by his relationship with his great patron and friend, Vittoria Colonna, culminating in the design of a bronze crucifix with four nails. The chapter investigates the object's artistic and devotional significance, demonstrating how the sculpture epitomises Michelangelo's artistic and religious meditations during the latter part of his life.

Chapter 2 moves to Seville. According to Francisco Pacheco, a cast of Michelangelo's bronze crucifix reached the city in 1597, and was immediately celebrated by sculptors and painters alike. The four-nails Christ eventually became the standard model for the representation of the crucifixion across Baroque Spain and its colonies. The young Velázquez, a pupil of Pacheco, would have certainly known the model from the time he spent in the workshop of his master, and openly referenced it in the *Portrait of Mother Jerónima de la Fuente*, which was painted in Seville around 1620.



Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Mother Jerónima de la Fuente*, c. 1620, oil on canvas, 162. 5 x 105 cm, Madrid, Araoz Collection.

The chapter contextualizes the commission within the bustling artistic and intellectual environment of early seventeenth-century Spain, connecting Seville to Rome's artistic legacy while also emphasising the psychological depth of Jerónima's depiction. The painting was in fact produced during the first stop of the nun's journey to the Philippines, shortly after she left her mother convent in Toledo, never to return.

Chapter 3 concludes this transcontinental journey in Manila, where Jerónima founded the Convent of Santa Clara after a gruelling voyage that lasted over fifteen months. Drawing on an extraordinary manuscript written by one of her companions, Mother Ana de Cristo, which has been recently discussed in a series of articles and a monograph by Sarah E. Owens, this chapter reconstructs Jerónima's journey and examines the challenges she faced in establishing the convent. Finally, it considers Velázquez's portrait as integral to the construction of Jerónima's sanctified identity following her death in Manila in 1630. It reflects the enduring legacy of Velázquez's painting, which continues to inspire devotion at the site of Jerónima's tomb in Quezon City, Manila, connecting art, faith, and memory across centuries and continents.

Together, these chapters highlight the interconnectedness of artistic and spiritual traditions in the early modern period. They reveal how objects, ideas, and individuals moved across geographic and cultural boundaries, shaping new narratives and forging enduring legacies. Velázquez and Michelangelo do not emerge as isolated geniuses, but as participants in a rich and dynamic web of cultural production that extended from Rome and Seville to the farthest reaches of the Spanish Empire, across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, to the Philippines.







→ Antonio Tempesta (Designer) and Giovanni Domenico de Rossi (Publisher), *Plan of the City of Rome*, 1593, engraving, 105 x 240 cm (this version updated and printed in 1645).



This impressive, twelve-plate map of Rome was originally designed by Antonio Tempesta in 1593 and updated and published by Giovan Domenico de Rossi in 1645. It is an extraordinary document, depicting the evolution of Rome between the late Renaissance and Baroque period. The Tiber River flows gracefully across the print, with the only crossing to the Vatican at Ponte Sant'Angelo, and further passages at Ponte Sisto, the Tiber Island and the Ponte di Santa Maria. The map's monumental scale—over 105 x 204 cm—allows the viewer to explore Rome's intricate urban fabric, comprising a dense network of roads, private palaces, smaller buildings, churches, monasteries, and antiquities. Among the many landmarks, the Colosseum and the uninhabited expanse of the Roman Forum, ideally framed by the Arch of Constantine and the Capitoline Hill, serve as visual anchors amidst the city's sprawl. Michelangelo himself settled at a stone's throw from the latter site in 1534. At 59, the artist had recently been commissioned to fresco the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel with the *Last Judgment*. The commission marked his final move to Rome, where he lived until his death in 1564.

After years of travel between Rome and Florence, troubled by political upheaval in the latter city, the commission provided Michelangelo with an opportunity for domestic stability. However, in his house on the Macel de' Corvi, the artist was concerned with profound questions about faith, influenced by the seismic shift caused by the Reformation across the Alps, and by attempts of Church reform at the Council of Trent (1545–1563). As highlighted by the recent British Museum exhibition, *Michelangelo: The Last Decades* (2024), meditations on the notion of salvation and the nature of Christian faith profoundly impacted the artist's creative output in the last thirty years of his life, informing the social relationships he forged in Rome. Among these relationships, his platonic friendship with Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara, was particularly significant.

ONE OF THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS AND FAMOUS LADIES IN ITALY AND IN ALL EUROPE [...] CHASTE YET BEAUTIFUL, A LATIN SCHOLAR, WELL-INFORMED AND WITH ALL THE OTHER PARTS OF VIRTUE AND FAIRNESS TO BE PRAISED IN WOMAN.

Francisco de Holanda, *On Antique Painting*, 1548



Anonymous (after Gaudenzio Ferrari), *Portrait of Vittoria Colonna*, 17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, 56 x 42 cm, Rome, Palazzo Colonna.

Born in 1490 into one of Rome's most ancient noble families, Vittoria Colonna married the Spanish *condottiero* Fernando d'Avalos at nineteen. After his death in 1525, she chose not to remarry, redirecting her devotion toward Christ. Living as a lay nun, Colonna travelled between convents, earning a reputation for her piety and extreme acts of penance. She became a prominent member of the *spirituali*, a like-minded group of intellectuals and high-ranking clergy advocating for reform within the Church. Colonna was also widely known and respected for her poetry; in the late 1520s she wrote sonnets inspired by Petrarch, which were eventually published in 1538.

It is unclear when Michelangelo and Colonna met, possibly as early as 1536—after all, the artist's house in Rome was a few meters away from the Colonna family palace. Their friendship was cemented by 1538, as is documented in a wealth of surviving letters. In February 1539, they attended together sermons on the Epistles of St Paul delivered at the church of San Silvestro on the Quirinal Hill. Their presence at San Silvestro was famously immortalised in Francisco de Hollanda's treatise *On Antique Painting*, which dramatises Michelangelo and Colonna's conversations on the nature of faith and art. In 1540, Colonna gifted Michelangelo a print edition of her poetry, the *Rime spirituali*. In one passage, she celebrates the sacrifice of Christ on the cross with a mystical synonym:

*Let the holy nails from now on be my quills,  
and the precious blood my pure ink,  
my lined paper the sacred lifeless body.*  
- trans. Abigail Brudin

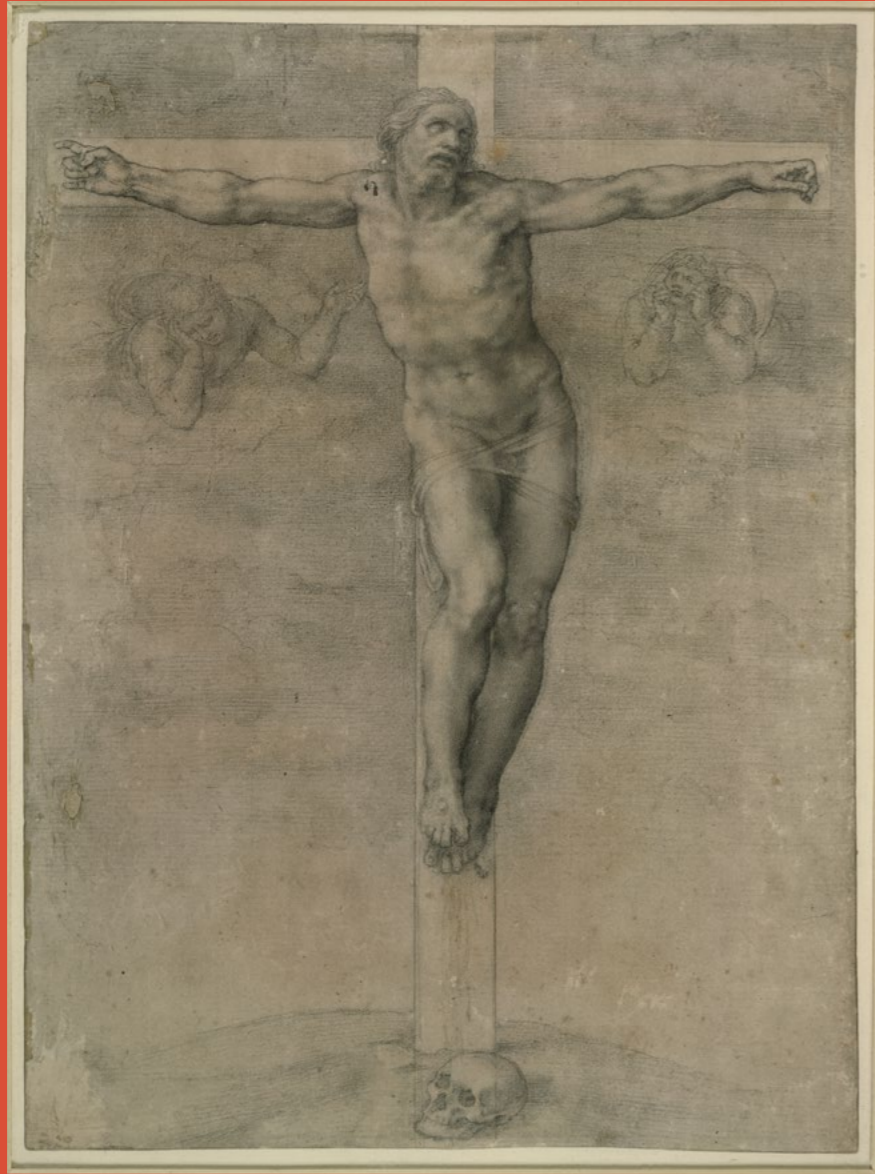
*Poichè 'l mio casto amor gran tempo tenne  
L'alma di fama accesa, ed ella un angue  
In sen nudrio, per cui dolente or langue;  
Volta al Signor, onde il rimedio venne,*

*I santi chiodi omai sieno mie penne;  
E puro inchiostro il prezioso sangue;  
Vergata carta il sacro corpo esangue,  
Sicch'io scriva per me quel, ch'ei sostenne.*

*Chiamar qui non convien Parnaso, o Delo;  
Ch'ad altra acqua s'aspira, ad altro monte  
Si poggia, u' piede uman per se non sale.*

*Quel Sol, ch'alluma gli elementi e 'l cielo,  
Prego, ch'aprendo il suo lucido fonte  
Mi porga umore alla gran sete uguale.*

Vittoria Colonna - *Rime spirituali*  
[Sonetto I, ed. 1760]

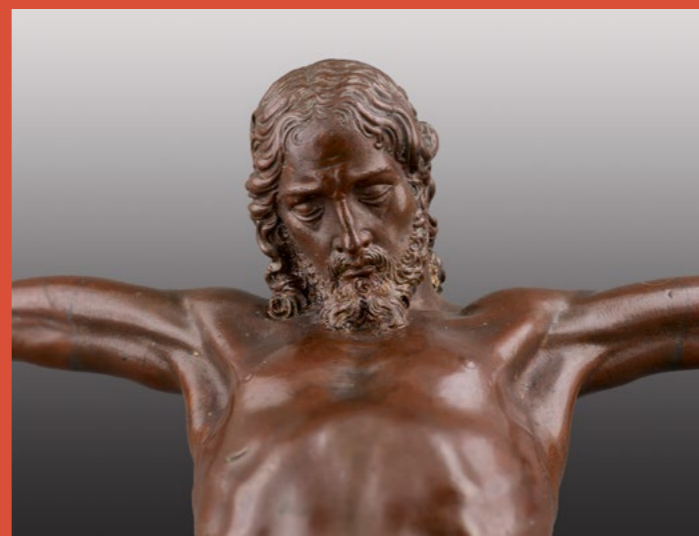


Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Christ on the Cross*, c. 1543, Black chalk on paper, 36.8 x 26.8 cm, London, British Museum, 1895.0915.504.

The lyrical metaphor between the body of Christ and the instruments of the poet would have resonated deeply with Michelangelo, who grappled with issues of faith around the suffering of Christ in sculpture, painting, and poetry throughout his career. The first marble *Pietà* (c. 1498-9), in St Peter's Basilica, and the painting of the *Entombement* (c. 1500-1) at the National Gallery, London, are examples of such early production, bookended by the *Rondanini Pietà* (1555-64) and the gruelling sheets depicting the *Crucifixion*, which he executed from the mid-1550s until his death. As Sarah Vowles explains, the drawn-out execution process involved in the production of such works constituted a form of spiritual meditation through the act of making.

Michelangelo's friendship with Vittoria Colonna marked a key moment in the development of his lifelong exploration of the theme of Christ's suffering. Following receipt of her poetry, the artist produced three designs as gifts for the Marchioness, a *Crucifixion*, a *Deposition*, and a *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*. While the original drawing for the latter composition has been lost, the *Crucifixion* and *Deposition* have been identified in drawings in the collections of the British Museum, London, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. The London sheet is particularly notable. In a letter, Colonna wrote that she had never seen anything more beautiful, praising the artist's execution and stating that she viewed it with a light, a magnifying glass, and in a mirror. Much like the acts of drawing and sculpting themselves, then, viewing Michelangelo's painstakingly devised, highly refined compositions called for continued engagement that amounts to a form of meditation. The same, continued engagement is invited by the present, extraordinary cast of the figure of Christ crucified designed by the artist.

The sculpture is a *tour de force* in anatomical modelling. The body of Christ is both taut and soft, with remarkable detailing in the tension of the figure's abdominal cavity. Christ's body does not turn: it is centralised, perfectly symmetrical, and still. The slight twist of the head provides the only form of animation in the figure's composition. Animation also transpires in the chasing of the hair and beard, which is perfectly parted in the middle. Rich detailing is also noticeable in the furrowed brow of Christ, His raised cheekbones and sunken cheeks, the cuticles of fingers and toes, the delicate veins that run on the figure's arms and legs, His areoles, and the bleeding wound to the side of the chest. Additionally, the feather weight of the sculpture attests to the technical excellence of the bronze founder who produced the cast.

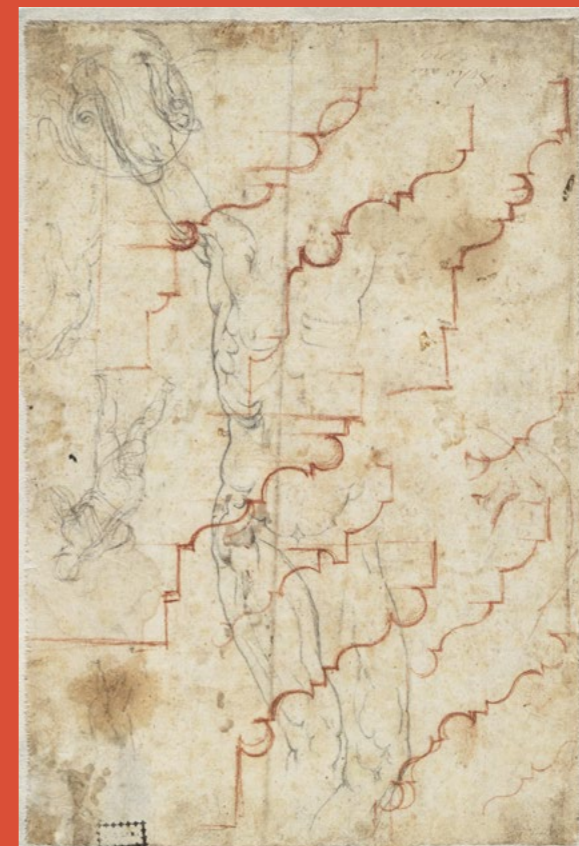


The attribution of the present model to Michelangelo was first put forward by Manuel Gomez Moreno in 1930 and has since been widely accepted. It is unclear when the artist produced a design for this Crucifix, or who was responsible for the very few, notable versions that were cast in bronze in Rome in the sixteenth century—of which the present model is possibly the finest surviving example. According to Rosario Coppel Aréizaga, the quality of the work suggests it may originate from the workshop of Guglielmo della Porta, a pupil of Michelangelo and one of the most skilled bronze founders in late sixteenth-century Rome. In particular, it could be attributed to the Flemish sculptor Jacob Cobaert, who collaborated with della Porta from 1550 until his death in 1576.

In a seminal, recent catalogue entry addressing another cast of the same model in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, James Draper suggested a date of around 1560-70. Draper's argument is based on comparisons between the figure and a drawing currently held in the Royal Collections, Windsor (c. 1560-4), where the arms are positioned at the same angle as the Met version, and where the shading hints at a degree of uncertainty in turning the hips of Christ to a more frontal alignment. Likewise, a bronze panel executed by Michelangelo's pupil, Jacopo del Duca, for the Certosa di San Lorenzo at Padula, in Sicily, dates from the same period.

However, the composition is an earlier design a cross-section of Christ's body preserved at the Teylers Museum, Haarlem, which is dated to the 1530s, potentially suggesting that the development of the model occurred earlier, or over several decades.

Michelangelo, *Studies of the Crucified Christ* (recto); *Crucified Figure, Figure Studies, Architectural Profiles* (verso), c. 1534-36, Black chalk with markings in pen and brown ink (recto); Black chalk, red chalk (verso), Haarlem, Teylers Museum, inv. A 34.





→ After a model by Michelangelo,  
*Christ on the Cross*, c. 1560-70, bronze, height: 27.3 cm,  
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 37.28a.

Although pinpointing the model's exact date remains challenging, it undoubtedly postdates Michelangelo's move to Rome in 1534 and his association with Vittoria Colonna. The inclusion of a fourth nail in the composition may also relate to ongoing exchanges between Michelangelo and his close friend and patron.

The debate over the number of nails used in Christ's crucifixion dates to early Christianity and persisted throughout the Baroque period. While depictions of Christ crucified with four nails were prevalent in the early Middle Ages, the shift to three nails occurred during the thirteenth century. Saint Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373) revived the four-nail depiction, describing a vision in which Christ was crucified with His left ankle crossed over His right. This deliberate reference to an earlier Christian tradition certainly appealed to the reformist Michelangelo and Colonna. Notably, Michelangelo's Deposition incorporated early Christian iconography in its use of a Y-shaped cross, further contextualising the present model in the debates around faith and salvation that occurred between artist and patron until the death of Vittoria Colonna in 1547.

The inclusion of a fourth nail is key to securing the attribution to Michelangelo and to identifying the Christ with the model mentioned in the treatise on the art of painting written by the Sevillian painter Francisco Pacheco. In the *Art of Painting*, published posthumously in 1649, he writes:

*Michelangelo, the most illustrious light of painting and sculpture, created the model of a crucifix measuring one tercia [c. 25 cm] with four nails, which we can appreciate today. A bronze cast of this piece was brought to Seville by Juan Bautista Franconio, a skilled silversmith, in the year 1597. Having enriched all painters and sculptors, the original was given to Pablo de Céspedes, a canon of the Holy Church of Córdoba, who carried it around his neck with great esteem.*

According to the author, a bronze cast of Michelangelo's Crucifix was carried westward from Italy, across the Mediterranean, to Seville, where it was much admired by local artists. The crucifix's arrival in Spain offers a compelling starting point for exploring its profound impact on local artistic traditions and its role in shaping the visual culture of the city in the early seventeenth century—and especially the early production of Spain's greatest Baroque painter, Diego Velázquez.







→ Simon W. Frisius, *Panoramic View of Seville*, 1617, engraving, 50.5 x 227.5 cm.

In his treatise on the *Art of Painting*, Pacheco provides further information about the reception of Michelangelo's crucifix in Seville. This masterful model 'enriched all painters and sculptors' in the city and opened new stylistic and iconographic avenues in Spain. In the artist's own words,

*I dare say with truth that I was, if not the first, at least among those who initiated this effort [of sculptural renovation] from around the year 1600 onward, particularly in Seville. For the first bronze crucifix with four nails by Michelangelo, cast from the one brought from Rome by the distinguished silversmith Juan Bautista Franconio, I painted it in many colours on 17<sup>th</sup> January of that same year. This approach began to take hold to such an extent that all other craftsmen started following this style.*

The success of the crucifix's polychromy and archaic, four-nails iconography is attested in a wealth of surviving visual sources. The Seville sculptor Juan Martinez Montañes produced two life-size Corpuses inspired by the composition between 1603 and 1606—one for the church of Our Lady of Mercy in Lima, Perú (1603-5), the other for the Cathedral of Seville (1604-6). Both sculptures were polychromed by Pacheco. Contemporaneously, numerous casts taken from the original crucifix carried from Italy to Spain were produced in bronze and silver; some were painted or patinated. These smaller crucifixes were either intended for private devotion, like the version formerly in the Gomez-Moreno collection, or were mounted for public display, such as the impressive processional cross in silver for the Cathedral of Seville.

Juan Martinez Montañes (with polychromy by Francisco Pacheco), *Crucified Christ*, 1604-6, polychrome wood, Cathedral of Seville.

Juan Bautista Franconio, attr., *Patriarchal Cross*, c. 1600, cast silver and gilt silver, Cathedral of Seville.





The dissemination of Michelangelo's design highlights the enduring appeal of the model. Strikingly, the four-nails Christ eventually became the standard iconography for the Crucifixion in painting and sculpture in Spain and its colonies throughout the seventeenth century. We have already mentioned how Montañes produced four-nails Corpuses for Lima and Seville. One further example is the Christ on the cross with four nails painted by Francisco Pacheco in 1614. The composition follows closely the bronze crucifix: the head is slightly tilted to the right of the figure and great attention is granted to the anatomical definition of the ribcage and abdomen of Christ. The main difference is found in the positioning of the legs, which do not cross, enhancing the symmetry and stillness of the composition. The painting, which is now preserved in the Instituto Gómez-Moreno de la Fundación Rodríguez-Acosta in Granada, anticipates later compositions by Alonso Cano, Francisco de Zurbarán, and, most importantly, by Pacheco's brightest pupil, Diego Velázquez. Velázquez's painting of the *Crucified Christ*, produced in 1632 and now hanging in the Prado Museum, depicts the figure of Christ with four nails and belies the artist's knowledge of Michelangelo's model filtered through Pacheco's earlier composition. Evidence of the artist's direct awareness of the crucifix carried from Spain to Italy is instead found in another, seminal work executed by the artist in his youth in Seville, the iconic portrait of the Poor Clare nun Jerónima de la Fuente.

▮ Francisco Pacheco, *Crucified Christ*, 1614,  
oil on canvas, Granada, Instituto Gómez-Moreno  
de la Fundación Rodríguez-Acosta.

▮ Diego Velázquez, *Crucified Christ*, 1632,  
oil on canvas, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

The *Portrait of Mother Jerónima de la Fuente* is one of the first two full-scale portraits ever produced by Velázquez, painted shortly after he had just left the workshop of Pacheco at the age of 19, when he set up his independent workshop in Seville. According to his former master, the artist possessed an unusual gift for portraiture from a very young age, and the painting is an unequivocal testimony to his precocious talent.

In the painting, Jerónima stands against a dark background and stares directly at the viewer with piercing eyes. Her face is framed by a wimple, covered by a hooded black dress and a large brown cape held by a piece of string across her chest. The size and monochrome treatment of her robes, which is interrupted only by the girdle to the true right of the figure, grants a striking monumentality to the composition. The contrast between the dark robes of the nun and the painting's background versus the white of her wimple and the light complexion of the figure's skin guides the viewer's gaze across the picture plane, directing it to her face and hands.

The personality of the sitter is masterfully conveyed through the depiction of the latter elements. The chiaroscuro treatment of her face highlights her rugged features; the interplay of light and shadow around her eyes and mouth underscores her resolution and determination. This is further demonstrated by the sitter's veiny, aged but evidently strong hands. Possibly following the iconography recently developed in Spain for the canonisation process of friar Francisco Jerónimo Simón (1578-1612), Jerónima holds a book with red-dyed pages, perhaps the rule of the Order of St Clare, in her left hand; in her right one, she wields a crucifix.





Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Mother Jerónima de la Fuente*, c. 1620,  
Oil on canvas, 162 x 107.5 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado, inv. 2873.

Two inscriptions appear at the top and bottom of the canvas respectively. The first reads ‘BONVM EST PRESTOLARI CVM SILENTIO SALVTARE DEI’ (‘It is good to await the salvation of god in silence’), aptly identifying silence as a key virtue of Jerónima, who was a cloistered nun. X-radiography has instead revealed that the much longer inscription at the bottom of the canvas was added after the painting was completed by the artist; we shall return to this later.

Two versions of this portrait survive—one housed in the Prado Museum and the present version from the collection of the Araoz family in Madrid. The pictures are both by the hand of the master. The two portraits share a nearly identical composition, size and a common provenance from the Convent of Santa Isabel de los Reyes in Toledo, whence the sitter hailed, and where both paintings were discovered in the first half of the twentieth century. The most apparent variation between the two lies in the palette, with the present version displaying greater chromatic contrasts and saturation, and in two details: the scroll to the right of the figure, and the position of the crucifix held in the nun’s right hand. In the Prado painting, a misguided restoration campaign in 1944 resulted in the erasure of the scroll, which remains intact in the Araoz version, elegantly inscribed with the phrase ‘SATIABOR DVM GLORI/FICATVS FVERIT’ (‘I shall be satisfied as long as He is glorified’). The more striking variation, however, concerns the position of the crucifix.



In the Prado version, the depiction of the crucified Christ is nearly illegible, whereas in the Araoz painting, the sculpture is turned by almost 90° and is thus rendered with far greater clarity. This enhanced legibility allows us to identify the Corpus with the model designed by Michelangelo, carried to Spain by the silversmith Juan Batista Franconio and then painted and celebrated by Velázquez's master, Francisco Pacheco, in Seville.

Close observation of the painted crucifix leaves little doubt about its identification. The position of Christ's arms and feet match those in the present sculpted version: the head tilts to the right; the index finger of the right hand of Christ is slightly misaligned from the rest of the fingers. The back of the cross in the Prado version of the painting shows two bolts corresponding to the position of the feet of Christ. In the present version, the nails clearly pierce through Christ's left and right foot separately, although only the former one is visible, following with precision the Michelangelesque prototype. Even the composition of the loincloth, which runs across the pelvis of the figure and the upper part of the thighs and is tied into a large knot on His right hip, follows closely the design of the silvered loincloth that accompanies the present cast.

It is impossible to know with certainty whether the sculpture constituted a specific iconographic reference dating from the artist's formative years spent in Pacheco's workshop, or whether it represents an actual devotional crucifix carried by the nun. While the success enjoyed by Michelangelo's model may point toward the latter explanation, the sophistication of Velázquez's composition may instead indicate the former. In any case, the inclusion of the crucifix situates the painting within the religious, cultural, and artistic milieu of Seville in the earlier part of the seventeenth century. Indeed, the context surrounding the meeting between artist and sitter appears to be as extraordinary as the painting itself.



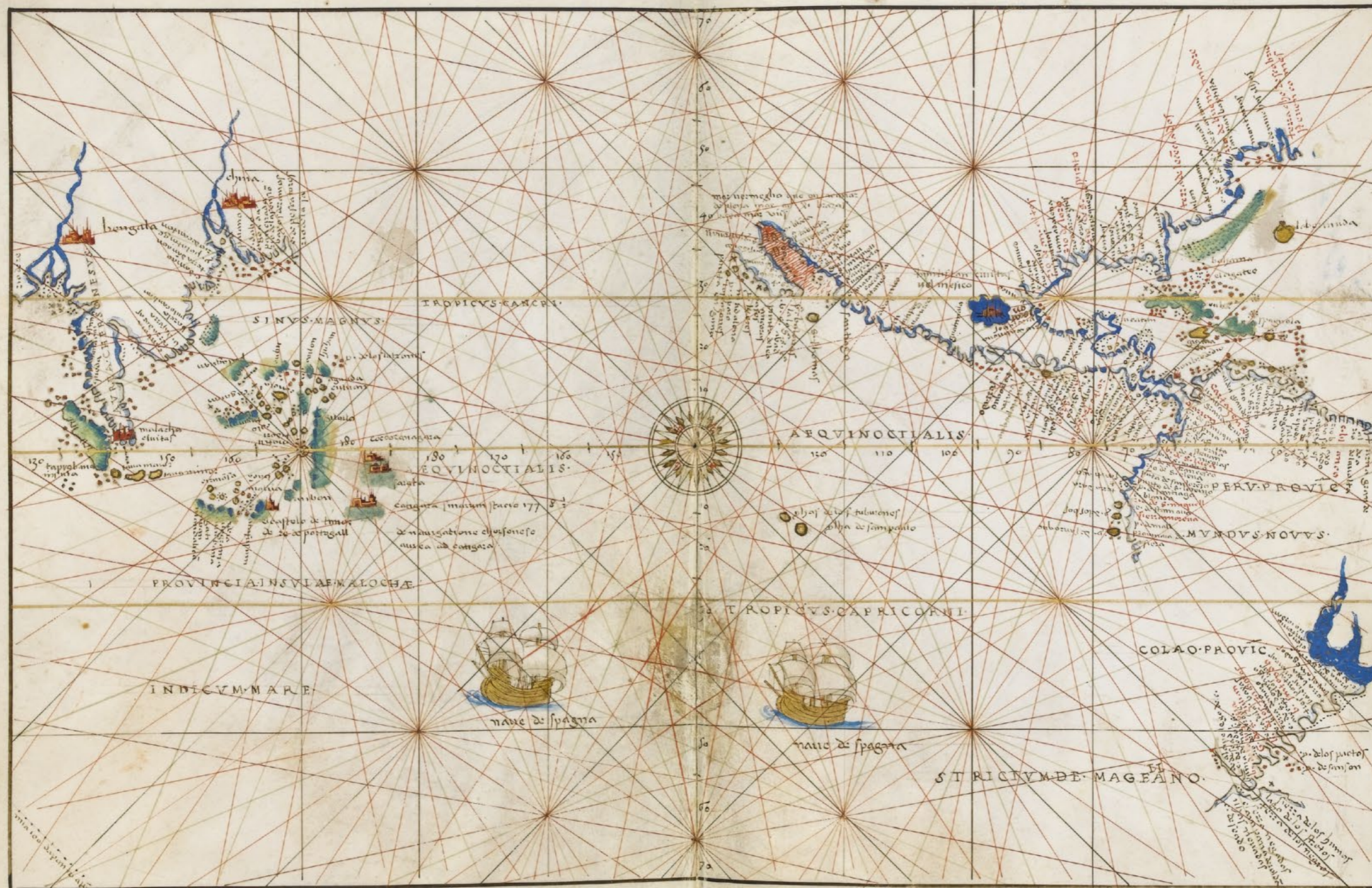
When Velázquez was commissioned to paint the portrait of Jerónima de la Fuente in 1620, the sitter was considerably more famous than the young painter tasked with recording her features on canvas. Sister Jerónima was born Jerónima Yáñez de la Fuente on 9 May 1556 in Toledo. She descended from a local noble family and was the third of four daughters, and received her early education from her mother, Doña Catalina, who taught her to read and write. She aspired to become a nun from a young age, inspired by St Clare of Assisi, one of the first followers of St Francis, and her devotion to a life of poverty. Jerónima eventually entered the Convent of Santa Isabel in Toledo on 15 August 1570 and took the name Jerónima *de la Asunción* (of the Assumption), committing herself to a life of strict enclosure, prayer, and penance for the next five decades.

The nun subjected her body to extreme mortifications, eating bitter fruits, wearing coarse shirts lined with sharp metal, and sleeping little. Wishing to experience the suffering of Christ, she would spend hours in her cell suspended from a wooden cross, balancing on tiptoes. At other times, she would carry the cross on her back, climbing hills barefoot among thorns, thistles, and nettles. Jerónima also laboured tirelessly in the convent's garden, donating the fruit of her work to prisons and hospitals. News of her extreme piety started to spread, attracting people from all walks of life, including the royal family, who sought her prayers and intercession. By 1620, when the portrait was painted, Jerónima was widely venerated as the 'Saint of Santa Isabel' and 'Saint of Toledo'. A process of beatification was started immediately after her death in 1630, continued throughout the eighteenth century, and was even re-ignited as recently as 1991. But it is for her extraordinary devotion that she was most widely known and celebrated during her lifetime, and why her life story inspired a wealth of hagiographic accounts, books, academic articles and, of course, Velázquez's masterpiece.

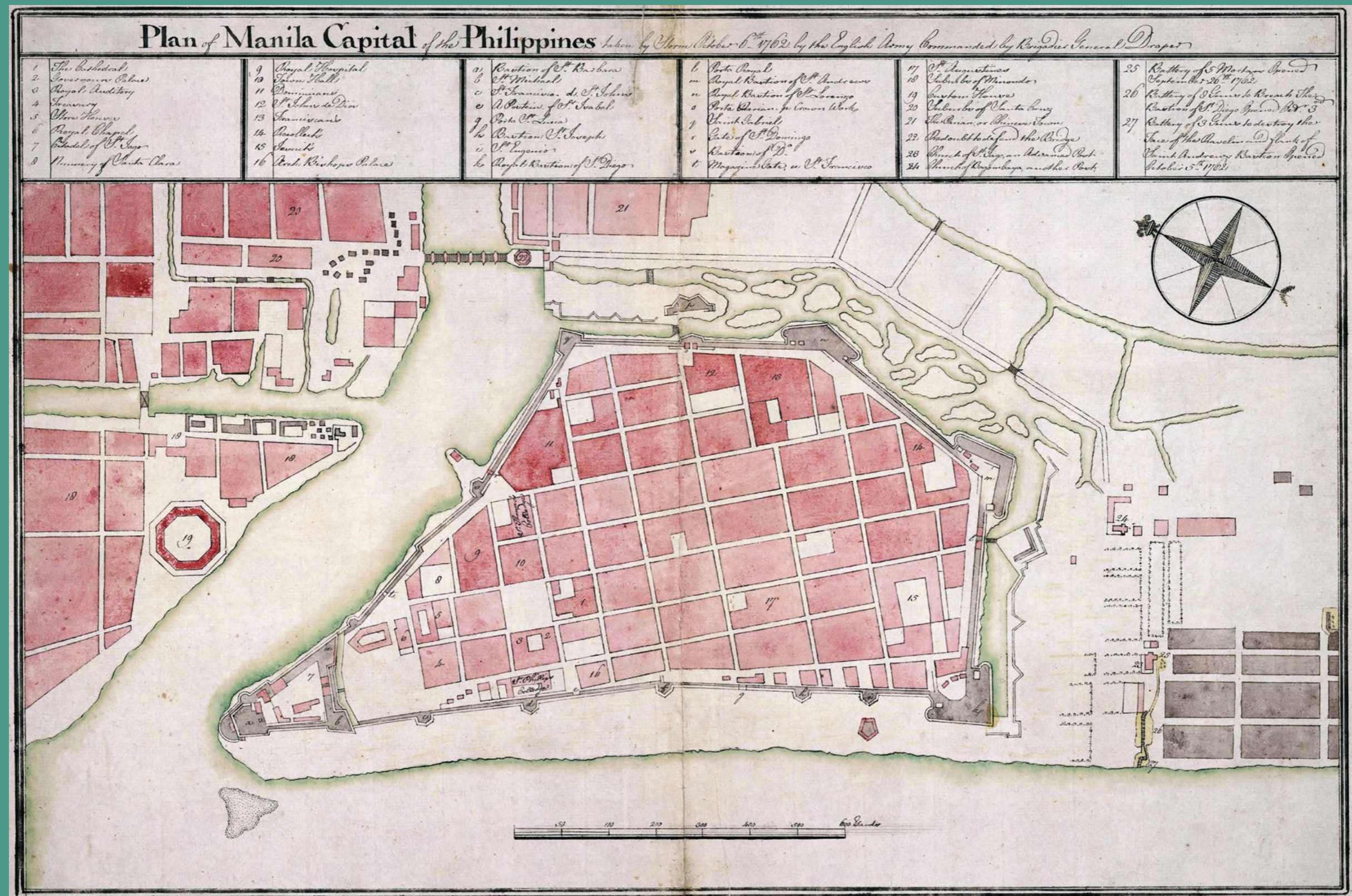
In fact, her fame stems primarily from her extraordinary journey: leaving Toledo for Cádiz, she crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the Spanish territories in Mexico, traversed the continent to the Pacific shores of Acapulco, and sailed on the 'Manila Galleon'—the vessel linking the American continent to Spain's Asian colony in the Philippines—where she founded and became the abbess of the first ever nunnery in the Far East.

Velázquez painted the portrait of Mother Jerónima during the first stop of her extraordinary journey across the globe, in Seville, where she arrived in early to mid-May 1620 accompanied by a small retinue of nuns that would follow her on her journey, and one Franciscan friar, José de Santa Maria. She remained in the city for nearly two months before continuing to Cádiz. Although no documentation of the commission survives, the existence of two versions of the portraits and their shared provenance from the nun's home convent in Toledo suggest that both were intended as keepsakes, preserving the memory of the order's most celebrated member as she embarked on her momentous journey. Since the convent was cloistered, the paintings may have possibly been destined for two spaces: one only accessible by the cloistered nuns, the other in a more public room or perhaps a chapel.

Viewed in this light, Velázquez's portrayal of Jerónima acquires more profound emotional significance. Beyond recording the nun's physical likeness, the painting testifies to her unwavering resolve at the outset of her mission. Understanding the full scale and scope of her journey is therefore essential to appreciating the characterisation within Velázquez's masterpiece. This will be the focus of the final chapter of this book.





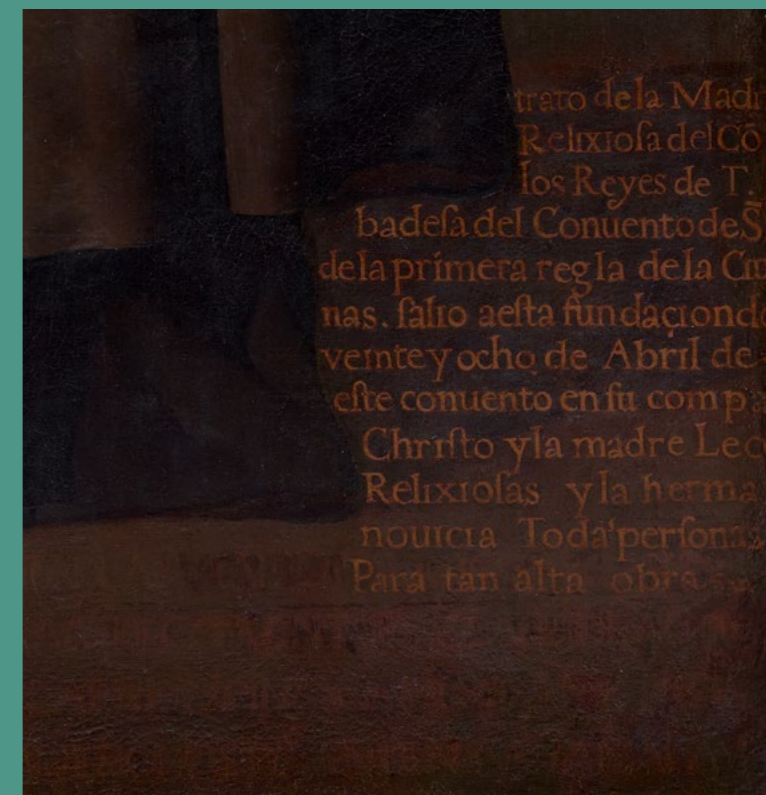
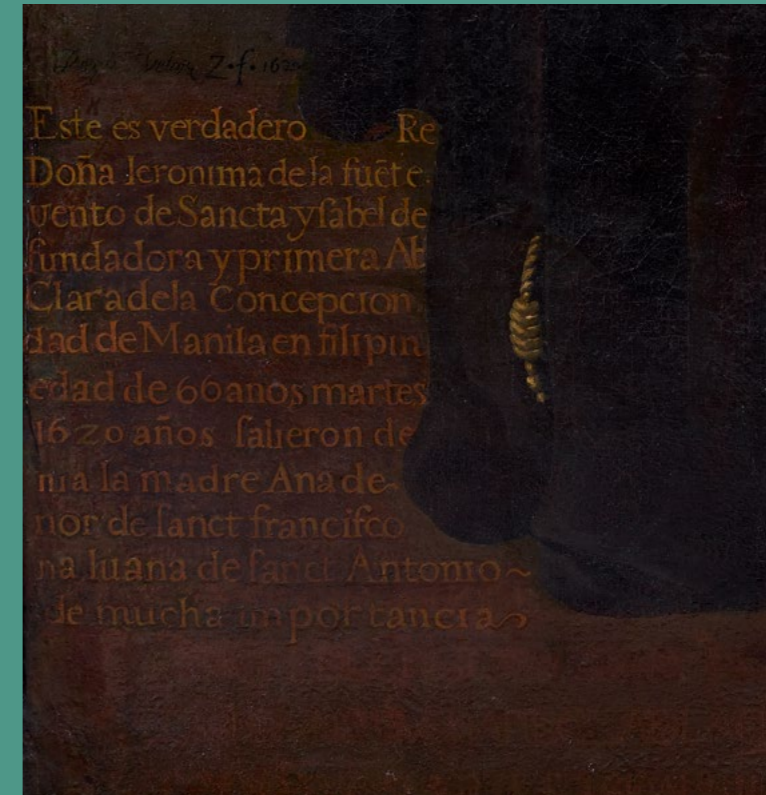


→ Plan of Manila Capital of the Philippines taken by Storm October, 6th, 1762 by the English Army Commanded by Brigadier General Draper, 1762, pencil, ink and watercolour on paper, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, MR/42/624.

Jerónima's journey to Manila is recorded in the inscription at the bottom of the Prado and Araoz versions of Velázquez's portrait, which can be translated thus:

*This is the true portrait of Mother Jerónima de la Fuente, a nun of the Convent of Santa Isabel de los Reyes in Toledo, foundress and first Abbess of the Convent of Santa Clara de la Concepción of the first rule in the city of Manila in the Philippines. She set out for this foundation at the age of 66 on Tuesday 28 April 1620. Mother Ana de Cristo and Mother Leonor de San Francisco, nuns, and Sister Juana de San Antonio, novice, departed from this convent in her company: all persons of great importance for such a superior task.*

The inscription refers to the nun as 'foundress' of the convent and therefore must have been produced once the journey to Manila had been completed, some thirteen months after Velázquez completed the first version of the portrait in Seville. This consideration explains the technical evidence, which indicates that the inscription was a later addition in both pictures. The text is clearly aimed at celebrating Jerónima, identifying the convent of Santa Isabel de los Reyes in Toledo, where the image itself was placed, as a key site in the life of the nun and her female companions as they departed on their voyage across the globe.





Knowledge of Jerónima's extraordinary journey is fundamentally reliant on the manuscript written by one of the nuns mentioned in the inscription, Sister Ana de Cristo. Ana was taught to write on her journey by the party's only male escort, friar José, with the specific purpose of documenting the life of the abbess. Her biographical account was written at the insistence of the Franciscan commissioner of the Indies and provides invaluable insights into the life and legacy of Jerónima. Although unpublished, it has been discussed in a wealth of publications, including the recent book *Nuns Navigating the Spanish Empire*, published in 2017 by Sarah Owens, to whose research the following paragraphs are much indebted.

According to Ana, Jerónima started planning her journey to the Philippines as early as 1599, when Dominican friar Diego de Soria visited the convent of Santa Isabel, purporting the urgent need for a nunnery in the Philippines. Soria explained to the nun the challenges of such a mission and the perilous journey across the world to reach the islands, but this only fuelled Sor Jerónima's determination to embark on her journey.

For many years, Jerónima thus dreamed of founding a new convent governed by the First Rule of St Clare, envisioning a community that would rely entirely on alms, accept no dowries or property from novices, and welcome postulants from all social classes, including native Filipinas. Her home convent of Santa Isabel followed the more lenient Second Rule, which permitted the ownership of property, but, despite this, Jerónima adhered to her own interpretation of the First Rule throughout her life, exemplified by her ascetic discipline. Her desire was to convert and provide an opportunity for young Philippine women to embrace Christ and become nuns.

The nun's vision for a convent in the Philippines eventually found support from key allies, including Franciscan friars, the Spanish monarchy, and a prominent couple stationed in Manila, Pedro de Chávez and Doña Ana de Vera, who aspired to become the patrons of the first female nunnery in Spain's only Asian colony. However, it took over twenty years for official permission to be granted. On 27 April 1620, Jerónima was formally appointed abbess of the new convent in Manila. The very next day, as is recalled in the painting's inscription, she left the cloister of Santa Isabel, never to return.

After the first stop in Seville, the nuns' arduous journey began with a passage across the Atlantic. The travellers made their way from Spain to the Caribbean, stopping at Guadeloupe, and then to Mexico, where they spent six months acclimatising. Jerónima and her companions endured significant hardships during this leg of the journey; she fell twice while travelling by mule—once into mud and a second time into a ravine, where she saved herself by clinging to a branch. Two more nuns joined the party in Mexico City before they resumed their journey along the so-called *Camino de China* (China Road) to the Pacific port of Acapulco. Along the way, they navigated swollen rivers and braved mosquito-infested terrain. By March 1621, they reached the coast, where they waited a month to board the 'Manila Galleon'.



Battista Agnese, Map of Central America (detail),  
in MS 181 (Portolan Atlas),  
f. 11r, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum

The crossing to the Philippines was no less treacherous. The Pacific Ocean is the largest geographical feature on earth, and the route from Manila to Mexico was only established in 1571 by the Spanish captain Andrés de Urdaneta. The ‘Spanish Lake’, as it came to be called, was traversed by boats looking for trade in silk and ceramic from mainland China, cotton from Mughal India, spices from Java, Ceylon, and the Moluccas, which were traded with silver mined in Spain’s Viceroyalties of Mexico and Perú. Monsoons, strong currents, and the immense mass of water separating the Philippines from the Americas made the journey extremely arduous: one nun died shortly after departing Acapulco.

After nearly a year and a half of travel, Jerónima and her companions finally arrived in Manila in August 1621. She could finally crown her dream, founding the Convent of Santa Clara, but at no easy cost. The Spanish nuns were greeted with challenges and opposition: the community had to relocate multiple times before settling in their location within the city walls (*intramuros*) due to Doña Ana, the convent’s principal benefactor, questioning her commitment. The convent was eventually established in 1624 but tensions arose within Manila’s elite families. Some worried that the convent would deplete the pool of marriageable daughters; others objected to the mingling of Spanish nobility with poorer women as well as *mestizas*, who were also seeking to join the order.

Despite these difficulties, Jerónima remained steadfast in her commitment to the First Rule of St Clare, guiding her new community with the same rigour and devotion she had practiced in Spain. After nine years, her health, having suffered through a lifetime of self-starvation and mortification, deteriorated. In October 1630, the nun made her last confession. As her congregation gathered at her bedside, she asked her fellow nuns to spread ashes on the floor in the form of a cross and lay her body upon it. Refusing any form of physical comfort, once she was placed on the ground, Jerónima aligned her body to the cross of ashes and eventually expired.

Her death was celebrated with great pomp in Manila. To accommodate the large crowds, the Franciscans held the funeral mass in the church, followed by a solemn procession through the city’s main streets, publicly carrying Jerónima’s body in a way reminiscent of St Clare’s own funeral in Assisi. Forty-two emblems, or *jeroglíficos*, comprising images, biblical references, and verses in Spanish, were devised to accompany her body through the streets of Manila.

Emblems were traditionally employed in the early seventeenth century at festivals celebrating beatifications and canonisations. Their use in this specific context reflects the immediate effort of both the local clergy and laypeople to advocate for the nun’s sanctification. Thanks to Sister Ana’s account, such efforts continued throughout the following two centuries, at times possibly drawing on Jerónima’s own treatise *Carta de marear en el mar del mundo* (‘Charting a Course Through the Sea of the World’), modelled on St Teresa of Ávila’s *Libro de la vida* (‘The Book of Life’). Jerónima’s extraordinary journey and spiritual life inspired numerous hagiographic accounts and biographical texts. To mention but two, friar Ginés de Quesada’s *Exemplo de todas las virtudes y vida milagrosa de la Venerable Madre Jerónima de la Assumpción* (‘Example of Every Virtue and the Miraculous Life of Madre Jerónima of the Assumption’) was completed in 1634 and published in 1713; another important work was friar Bartolomé de Letona’s *Perfecta religiosa* (1662).



Joseph Mota, *Verdadero retrato de la Venerable Madre Gerónima de la Asunción*, engraving, 1712, from Ginés de Quesada, *Exemplo de todas las virtudes*, 1713.

As books on the life of the nun were produced, a new iconography was generated. Joseph Mota's engraving representing the 'true portrait' of Mother Jerónima (*Verdadero retrato de la Venerable Madre Gerónima de la Asunción*), published in Quesada's *Exemplo de todas la virtudes*, depicts the nun wearing her dark robes and white wimple, with an emaciated face and her hands joined in prayer. A crucifix, a skull, and an hourglass appear on the table in front of her, accompanied by a crown of thorns, whip, and chains. Taken together, they represent the instruments of meditation and self-punishment essential to reaching saintly status. The inclusion of a wart above one of the figure's eyes—a detail also found in Velázquez's portrait—may indicate that, as suggested in the inscription at the bottom of the print, the engraving was produced following other 'true' portraits of the nun, perhaps executed immediately after her death. As Wei Jiang explains, this suggestion is made even more likely by the fact that the engraving was commissioned by friar Agustín de Madrid, procurator of Jerónima's beatification cause in Mexico, who travelled from Manila to Rome in 1711 and who may have had access to other images of Jerónima. Though not executed 'from life', the engraving constitutes an ideal counterpoint to Velázquez's masterpiece from 1620. While Mota's print embodies a gendered vision of sainthood—one in which sanctity is achieved through prayer, meditation, and self-mortification—Velázquez's portrait instead presents Jerónima as resolute and vigorous, ready for her mission. As Tanya J. Tiffany has convincingly argued, the portrait consciously frames Jerónima as a *mujer varonil*, or 'virile woman', a contemporary term for women of exceptional fortitude. Though still governed by male biases, Velázquez's portrait thus transcends the gender boundaries that are instead maintained by Mota's print, identifying Jerónima's saintliness as dependent on her 'manliness'.

Following Jerónima's death, Ana de Cristo assumed leadership of the convent in Manila. The institution survived in its original site for more than three centuries, overcoming natural disasters, including devastating earthquakes, and historical upheavals, such as the Spanish-American War of 1898. Nowadays, a photographic copy of Velázquez's masterpiece hangs above the tomb of Mother Jerónima inside the Real Monasterio de Santa Clara in Quezon City, to the northeast of Manila, where the convent was relocated after the original site was bombed during the Second World War.

The presence of the photographic reproduction of Velázquez's masterpiece above the tomb in Quezon City constitutes a fitting end to this narrative. Although lacking any artistic value, the photo translates Velázquez's masterpiece into a reproducible medium, transforming it into a devotional focus for visitors to the tomb of the founder of Manila's Convent of Santa Clara, and providing the image with a new geographical, cultural, and religious context. In 1620, Velázquez's decision to include the bronze crucifix designed by Michelangelo in his depiction of Jerónima de la Fuente represents an equally significant geographical and cultural shift: a sculpture devised in Rome at the height of the artist's meditation on the suffering of Christ—catalysed by his friendship with Vittoria Colonna—came to be known as an irresistible feat of artistic and technical prowess in Seville.

Taken together, these two works reveal a unique connection between arguably the greatest Renaissance sculptor and the greatest Baroque painter, testifying to the generative power of art across cultural, geographical, ethnic, and religious borders. They remind us that neither Michelangelo nor Velázquez existed as isolated geniuses but were embedded within rich networks of relationships. Vittoria Colonna and Jerónima de la Fuente did not only serve as enduring sources of inspiration and devotion, but also shaped the cultural and spiritual frameworks that informed the artists' works and their legacies across the globe.



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D. Velázquez, *Portrait of Mother Jeronima de la Fuente*, 1620. © Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado.

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