

# Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695; SJIC)



1648 (November 12: Octavio Paz's theory about her birth date) Juana de Asbaje y Ramírez was born in San Miguel Nepantla, México (Valley of Mexico); she was her parents' illegitimate daughter. Her father was Pedro Manuel de Asbaje, and her mother was Isabel Ramírez. As a child she lived on her grandfather's hacienda in Panoayán, which is located in a farming region between Mexico City and the Popocatepetl volcano (17,887 feet). At the hacienda she read all of her grandfather's books including the theological works of the Portuguese Jesuit, António de Vieira.

**In order to visualize where she lived as a child, see the following images:**

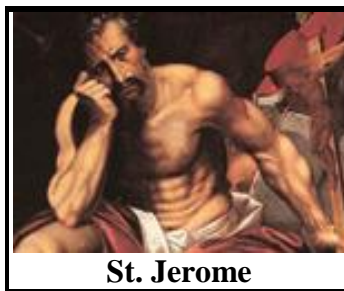


- 1654 At six years old, she learned to read at a school called "Amiga" (girl friend) in Amecameca (near Mexico City).
- 1656 Her beloved maternal grandfather, Pedro Ramírez de Santillana died. Upon his death she was sent to live in Mexico City with an aunt.
- 1656-61 Juana de Asbaje y Ramírez lived an aunt and, later, either with unknown relatives or in the court of the viceroy.
- 1658 Juana de Asbaje y Ramírez composed a eulogy (*una loa*) for the Holy Eucharist (*el Santo Sacramento*), the first poem we know she wrote.
- 1661 Juana de Asbaje y Ramírez moved permanently to Mexico City.
- 1664 She arrived at the Mexican vice-regal court of the *marqués* (marquis) de Mancera and his wife, the *marquesa*. The *marquesa* would become Juana's patron, and Juana would refer to the *marquesa* in her works as "Laura." That is, Juana became the *marquesa's*

*dama*, or lady-in-waiting. The marqués de Mancera's actual name was Antonio Sebastián de Toledo. He was the viceroy from 1664 to 1673.



- 1665 Juana de Asbaje y Ramírez wrote a poem about the death of the king of Spain, Felipe IV.
- 1666 She became a novitiate (*una novicia*) in the convent of the Discalced Carmelites (*las Carmelitas Descalzas*); after three months in this convent of barefoot nuns, Juana changed her mind and left the convent.
- 1668 Viceroy Mancera gave Juana a test to determine if Juana's knowledge and intelligence were legitimate because she had shown signs of extraordinary talent. The test results amazed him and everyone else.
- 1669 Juana became a nun in the religious Order of San Jerónimo, and she signed her last will and testament in and for this religious order. (The Orden de San Jerónimo was less severe and less strict than the Carmelite order she tried out first.)



Juana de Asbaje y Ramírez changed names to **Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (SJIC)**. She lived in the convent of **Santa Paula** in the center of Mexico City. This convent was founded in 1586. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the convent has been transformed into a university. For a visual tour of this Mexican convent-become-university,

see: => [Universidad Claustro de Sor Juana](#).



**Note on Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (1645 – 1700):** From about 1668 (exact year unknown), Sor Juana became acquainted with the outstanding Mexican humanist, Sigüenza y Góngora. Until her death in 1695, she and this slightly younger contemporary of hers, who was nearly her equal intellectual, communicated and collaborated on a regular basis. As a proud intellectual born and educated in Mexico, he was a polymath (poetry, history, philosophy, science, astronomy, mathematics, and much more) and writer who held many colonial government and academic positions. (Incidentally, he was related to the famous Spanish baroque poet, Luis de Góngora.) From 1660 to 1668 he was a Jesuit, but he was expelled for dissolute behavior, after which he became a secular priest without a parish. As an antagonist of the famous Jesuit astronomer and explorer (Arizona) Eusebio Kino, Sigüenza y Góngora published an anti-superstition book titled *Philosophical Manifesto against the Comets Stripped of their Power over the Timid* (1681). In the 1680's he produced the first complete map of Nueva España (New Spain), after which he was named to the position of royal geographer, and in 1692 he accompanied an expedition to Pensacola Bay, Florida. In 1690, he published what some scholars consider the first historical novel in Latin America, *Los infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*. In 1693, he published the first newspaper in New Spain, *El Mercurio Volante*. In addition to these pursuits he learned Náhuatl in order to learn about Mexica/Aztec history and culture. Sigüenza helped his friend Don Juan Alva Ixlilxochitl, son of the indigenous nobleman Fernando de Alva Ixlilxochitl (1587-1650), in a lawsuit to retain his possessions near the great pyramid at Teotihuacan. Sigüenza's payment was a gift of Aztec codices about the lords of Texcoco. He also researched and wrote key works on the Virgen de Guadalupe including a 1531 codex containing proof of the apparition at Tepeyac before (Saint) Juan Diego. In terms of his relationship with Sor Juana, they collaborated on the triumphal arch welcoming the new Viceroy to Mexico, *el marqués de la Laguna* (don Tomás Antonio de la Cerda y Aragón) and his *marquesa* wife, María Luisa Manrique de Lara. It is then that he pronounced the lapidary statement about Sor Juana:

“[Sor Juana’s fame] will only end with the world. Finally, he gave the eulogy oration at Sor Juana’s funeral in 1695. Before he died in 1700 he was reconciled with the Jesuit Order.

1674-1680 A new Viceroy ruled the *Virreinato de Nueva España* (Viceroyalty of New Spain): Fr. Payo Enríquez de Rivera. He was simultaneously viceroy and Archbishop of New Spain.

SJIC wrote three baroque sonnets on the death of the *virreina* (the wife of her first viceroy, the Marqués de Mancera). Sor Juana called this woman "Laura."



Viceroy and  
Archbishop  
Enríquez

1676-1691 SJIC wrote fifteen *villancicos* (Christmas carols), which were commissioned by various people in the court and in convents.

1680-1686 A new viceroy arrived: *el marqués de la Laguna* and *la marquesa*, his wife. The viceroy's name was don Tomás Antonio de la Cerda y Aragón, and his wife was María Luisa Manrique de Lara. Both came from the highest Spanish aristocracy, and both favored and sponsored SJIC.



Viceroy de la Laguna

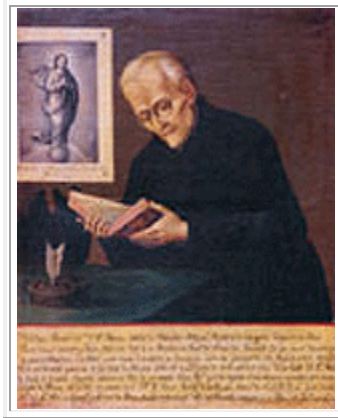
SJIC wrote love poems (*poesía erótica*) and plays (*comedias*) for her protectress, *la marquesa*.

SJIC published her long allegorical poem, "Neptuno alegórico".

1680-1690 SJIC wrote poems and plays for the court, for her own intellectual pleasure and to suppress and sublimate her own emotions and psyche.

1681-1690 SJIC wrote a letter to P. Antonio Núñez de Miranda, who was her father confessor from 1671-1690. She accused him of intolerance and she dismissed him

(rejected him) as her confessor in 1690. (Nuns had obtained the right to dismiss a confessor (change confessor on their own) as one of the reforms of the Council of Trent (el Concilio de Trento) in 1563. Painting of Núñez de Miranda:



- 1685 SJIC wrote the masterpiece of her poetry, "*el Primero Sueño*" (First Dream). This long philosophical, metaphysical baroque poem was published in 1692. To read this poem on-line in Spanish, click on this URL: => [El Primero Sueño](#). And in English translation: => [First Dream](#).
- 1686-1688 A new *virrey* and *virreina* arrived: the Count of Monclova (*el conde de Monclova*), Melchor Portocarrero y Lasso de la Vega. Unusually, he did not serve a full term in New Spain, because he was called to Lima to become the viceroy of Perú in 1688.
- 1686 SJIC wrote a poem celebrating the viceroy's wife (*la virreina*), whom she calls by the cryptic name of "Lysi".
- 1688-1696 A new viceroy ruled over New Spain, the Count of Galve (*el conde de Galve*). His name was Gaspar de Sandoval Silva y Mendoza.



El conde de Galve

The first edition of Volume I one SJIC's works was published in Madrid. Its title is: *Inundación castálida*. (Inundation of the Muses).

- 1690 SJIC's enemy arrived in Mexico: the new archbishop, Rev. Francisco de Aguiar y Seijas, a Jesuit priest.



**Fr. Aguiar y Seijas**

SJIC's *auto sacramental* (one-act religious play), *El divino Narciso* (Divine Narcissus, allegory for Christ), was published.

SJIC's major theological essay, "*Carta atenagórica*", was published without her knowledge. This is a critical essay of SJIC's in which she comments on a published sermon. The *Carta atenagórica* was printed with a prologue by a certain Sor Filotea de la Cruz, which was, in fact, the pseudonym (pen name) of Fr. Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, who was the bishop of Puebla (a major city SE of Mexico City) and who belonged to the male branch of Sor Juana's religious order, the Orden de San Jerónimo. Bishop Fernández had not obtained Sor Juana's permission to publish her essay (the *Carta*); furthermore, the bishop chose the title for the publication. In her essay, Sor Juana attacks a sermon by the highly respected and influential Portuguese Jesuit theologian Vieyra from early in the seventeenth century. Within a couple of years, the controversy caused by Sor Juana's *Carta* caused her to become disgraced, censured, and ordered to cease all humanistic activities including, even, just reading.



**Bishop Fernández de  
Santa Cruz**

To read this essay in Spanish, click following URL: => [\*Carta atenagórica\*](#).

The Bishop of Puebla prefaces the *Carta* with a letter, which he styles as "friendly advice" to Sor Juana by lightly threatening her for the mistakes she makes in the content of her essay; he also threatens her by saying that her ideas put her eternal salvation in grave danger; and he adds that she should apply herself only to religious and spiritual matters—not scholarship, which, for him, is reserved exclusively for men. He signs his "letter" as Sor Filotea de la Cruz, pretending to be a nun (Sister Lover of God of the Cross).

- 1691 SJIC writes her response to Sor Filotea's prologue: "*La respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*" (Answer to Sor Filotea...). This essay is both a major autobiography and a brilliant legal brief, as it were, in defense of her right as a woman to think, study, write, and publish her thoughts.  
 (November 25) SJIC's last *villancicos* (Christmas carols) are in the Cathedral of Oaxaca (southern Mexico). They are titled "Villancicos de Santa Catarina de Alejandría".  
 To read this essay in Spanish, click following URL: => [La respuesta](#).  
 For homework/study questions on the "Answer"/"La respuesta", see: => "[The Answer](#)" **Study Questions**.
- 1692 The first edition of Volume II of SJIC's works is published in Sevilla, Spain, with a new title: *Obras* (Works). (Notice that Sor Juana is becoming famous, popular, and, for her, dangerously well known.)  
 SJIC's "*Primero Sueño*" is published (see 1685 above).  
 The Bishop of Puebla (of the San Jerónimo order), who is opposed to the Archbishop's fanatical Jesuit confessor, Fr. Núñez de Miranda (see: 1690 above), orders SJIC's response essay, "*La respuesta...*", published, thereby sealing the condemnation of Sor Juana by higher religious authorities.
- 1693 Fr. Núñez de Miranda continues having powerful influence throughout the Viceroy's court in Mexico City. Fr. Núñez attacks SJIC and orders his successor as her confessor to force her to make a *confesión general* (general confession of her entire life and lifelong sins). SJIC follows his order and make a *confesión general* of all her sins.  
 Fr. Núñez de Miranda orders her confessor to have everything SJIC had in her convent cell removed (library, scientific instruments, musical instruments, music scores, manuscripts, writing implements, art works, etc.) and he then gives all of it to Archbishop Aguiar y Seijas, who uses and stores all of it.
- 1694 SJIC signs a declaration of faith with her own blood; she repents about everything she had done and accomplished in her life; and she discontinued studying theology and every non-religious activity.
- 1695 (April 17) Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz dies at 4:00 a.m. during an epidemic of undetermined nature that was ravaging Mexico City that winter and spring.
- 1700 The posthumous publication of Volume III or SJIC's works was published: *Fama y Obras póstumas* including the first publication in Madrid of her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is probably the foremost woman writer in the history of Latin American humanities, and she is justly renowned as one of the finest writers in the history of humanistic letters. She wrote entirely in the baroque manner, and her works continue to have universal appeal. In addition, she is one of the world's first feminists more or less in the sense that this term and liberation movement came to be known and styled in the late

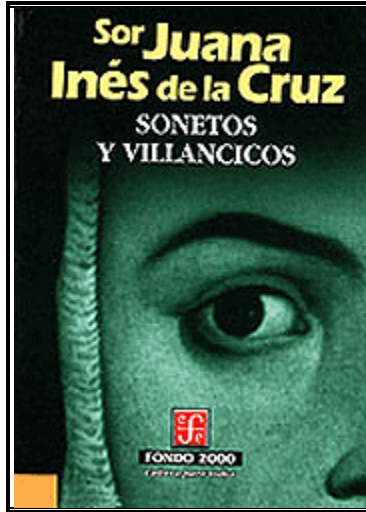
twentieth century. The breadth and depth of her talents were extraordinary. She excelled in literature (especially the prose essay, poetry and drama), music (singing, composition, and performer on several instruments), philosophy, science, languages, metaphysics, and theology. Sor Juana's life gives witness both to immense success and terrible tragedy. Her achievements in many fields of the humanities are lasting contributions to the patrimony of humankind's great productions throughout the ages. Her woman's voice, crying out for the right of self-expression and self-realization, remains an elegant call for truth and justice and human right for women, and, indeed, therefore, for all humans. The social forces that silenced her at the end of her life and that, no doubt, contributed to her relatively premature death, are nothing less than tragic. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was almost without a doubt the most intelligent and most accomplished person (man or woman) of the entire Colonial period in the Viceroyalty of New Spain.

To sum up, Sor Juana lived during the Latin American Colonial period of the Spanish Viceroyalty (*el virreinato*) of New Spain (Nueva España). Her cultural period is the Baroque (*el barroco*) with culture, humanities, and especially literature imported, for the most part, from Spain. The dominant religion in which she lived and died is that of the Counter-Reformation of the Roman Catholic Church with special influence of the Order of the Jesuits. Her philosophical approach and content is circumscribed by Scholasticism (authority of the Christian Church Fathers of the early centuries of the C.E.). The clearest evidence of her scholastic approach to thought and religion is seen in her *Carta atenagórica*. Her close friend was Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, who was a relative of the great Spanish Baroque poet (died, 1627). The latter man of letters and science was the second most important intellectual in Mexico during the Colonial period. Both Sor Juana and Sigüenza y Góngora lived in a world that was closed to change, to foreign (i.e., non-Spanish) influences, innovation, tolerance. It is notable and telling, perhaps, that Sor Juana, even in such a society, wrote relatively few religious poems. By contrast, her masterpiece is the long poem, "*El primero sueño*" (First Dream). This poem concentrates on the material, phenomenal world, not religion or the spiritual world. Her language in this poem is so symbolic that it is virtually hieroglyphic; indeed, elements she used in the composition of this poem include Egyptian mythology, Hermeticism, magic, and the works of the Jesuit thinker Athanasius Kircher (ca 1601 – ca. 1666). The result she achieves is that of humanistic syncretism (i.e., European and indigenous American cultures) along with universal Christian symbolism.

(Note on Fr. Athanasius Kircher: he was a 17<sup>th</sup> century German Jesuit intellectual who has been compared to Leonardo da Vinci for the breadth and inventiveness of his scholarly pursuits. He worked famously in fields as varied as Asian culture, geology, medicine (microbes, diseases, etc.), Egyptian hieroglyphics. He published more than 40 books. He is less known than he should be because his fame was eclipsed by the French rationalist René Descartes.)



To read and study one of the most famous of Sor Juana's sonnets, click on the following image or on the sonnet link button below:



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