James M. Córdova, *The Art of Professing in Bourbon Mexico: Crowned-Nun Portraits and Reform in the Convent*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014.

James M. Córdova’s *The Art of Professing in Bourbon Mexico* is the first English-language monograph to treat the Mexican crowned-nun portraits, paintings commemorating women on the day they took their vows and professed into a convent. The profession regalia included a crown of flowers, which was placed atop the nun’s head during the ceremony as a symbol of her marriage to Christ when she joined the convent. Thus, the name “crowned-nun portrait” references this signal ornament. Nuns were buried with crowns of flowers atop their heads as well, and those who led particularly noteworthy lives were sometimes painted while lying in state. Córdova confirms that these death portraits were a precedent to the profession portraits of living nuns, which developed in eighteenth-century New Spain.¹ Many of these works were painted by anonymous artists, and the largest collection is on permanent display in the *Monjas Coronadas* exhibit in Mexico’s *Museo del Virreinato* some 40 km north of Mexico City in the picturesque town of Tepotzotlán. In addition to using the portraits in this exhibit as examples, Córdova also includes illustrations of isolated works found in museums around Mexico and throughout the world as well as photographs of paintings from private collections. The latter belong to the Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).

Córdova charts a number of extant portraits based on the convents where the nuns depicted had professed.² The chart is not—and

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1. James M. Córdova, *The Art of Professing in Bourbon Mexico: Crowned-Nun Portraits and Reform in the Convent* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 33–34.
2. See Table 5.1 in Córdova, *The Art of Professing in Bourbon Mexico*, 136–137.
cannot be—exhaustive: no telling how many paintings were actually produced and how many remain in unknown private collections. He predicts more portraits might come to light with the publication of his book. The chart could be of interest to historians of particular orders and convents, though it does not include the current location of the extant portraits. It only indicates, for example, two crowned-nun portraits that came out of Mexico City’s Encarnación Convent, but he gives no further information as to the current whereabouts of the two portraits. A crowned-nun portrait originating from the Encarnación is preserved in Frederic Church’s home (Olana) in the state of New York. It is mentioned in an essay by Elizabeth Perry, for example, but readers will be left wondering if this painting is one of the two that Córdova lists. Still, the breadth of the chart is remarkable, and no doubt a product of arduous archival work, which allowed Córdova to conclude that the majority of the crowned-nun portraits came from convents of the Order of the Immaculate Conception (Conceptionists), and that a significant number were painted during the late eighteenth century when convent life was being reformed by Church and government officials. Córdova summarizes the conflicts between the convents and reformers in chapter five. He also discusses the significance and meanings that individual orders and convents—and their patrons—ascribed to the portraits during this complicated time. An impressive full-color gallery just before the epilogue depicts some of the most beautiful examples of extant crowned-nun portraits from the period.

At first glance, one could assume that the paintings speak largely for themselves: they depict an important woman, or at least a woman whose family could afford to commission artwork; their inscriptions (leyendas/escutcheons) describe said woman’s lineage and mention the convent in which she professed; and they commemorate an important ritual, which sentenced women to a life of enclosure in a convent. The faces of the women in these portraits peer back at the observer with a mysterious impression of satisfaction, humility, and piety. Córdova has certainly lifted any veil of mystery surrounding these portraits with his analysis and thorough explanation of the essential makeup of the portraits—the habits, the crowns, the flowers, the palm fronds, the staffs, the books, the baby Jesus statues—according to Christian artistic traditions. He argues that even the nuns’ facial

3. Elizabeth Perry, “Convents, Art, and Creole Identity in Late Viceregal New Spain,” in Woman and Art in Early Modern Latin America, ed. Kellen Kee McIntyre and Richard E. Phillips, 321–341 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).
expressions were, by convention, a product of Novohispanic and Spanish portraiture traditions. Córdova’s focus is on the information these images tell us regarding the eighteenth-century society that created them: the works were outward demonstrations of social prestige. In chapter four, he takes the works out of their Creole/Spanish-centered positions as he turns the conversation toward convents exclusively built for Native women in New Spain and the portraits that came out of those institutions. Although Córdova notes that very few profession portraits of Native women remain, the result of having scrutinized this subset of crowned-nun portraits is not surprising: they also aimed at showing off family wealth in the same way that portraits of Spanish and Creole nuns called attention to their elite families. His astute analysis of the relevant primary and secondary literature on the cultures and customs of pre-colonial Mesoamerica allows Córdova to suggest convincingly that the floral accouterments in the portraits show concordances between Christian and Native beliefs.

The human interactions that took place from the initial commissioning of the art works to their actual painting and final delivery are missing in the book, no doubt owing to the scant archival record. Whether the paintings ultimately ended up hanging in the living rooms of the depicted nuns’ proud parents is also unknown, but Córdova rightly incorporates this hypothesis made by Rogelio Ruiz Gomar in a footnote. Indeed, he references a good sum of secondary literature on the institutional and artistic history of Novohispanic society throughout the monograph while also bringing to light salient primary sources, such as notable nuns’ hagiographies, profession manuals, convent sermons, books of customs, and several others. As with any well-researched book, Córdova’s bibliography provides a substantial list of sources and is a useful guide for other researchers. It is preceded by a glossary in which words and phrases particular to the period have been conveniently defined. The words in the glossary are italicized when used throughout the book’s chapters, which is a helpful detail.

The book is a delight to read and informative for scholars of New Spain interested in the intersections between art and society, convent culture, and late-eighteenth-century Church history. As Córdova has shown, these portraits represent more than mere examples of the faces that abided in the convents. His critical interpretation of the

4. Córdova, *The Art of Professing in Bourbon Mexico*, chapter two.
5. Ibid., 101.
6. Ibid., 190.
portraits places these works of art at the center of patronage-dependent convents, whose benefactors and inhabitants were in constant need of asserting their identity and social standing. Córdova challenges scholars of the period to consider the degree to which the same late-eighteenth-century societal norms he discusses influenced other works of visual art, as well as music, architecture, and literature during New Spain’s march toward independence.

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Mariana Terán Fuentes, Por lealtad al rey, a la patria y a la religión Zacatecas (1808–1814), México, Secretaría de Educación del Gobierno del Estado de México, 2012, 502 pp. (Colección Identidad / Historia).

Una de las etapas más estudiadas de la historia mexicana ha sido, qué duda cabe, el proceso de independencia. Como todos sabemos, muchas y de muy diverso signo han sido las construcciones historiográficas que sobre la emancipación de la Nueva España se han ido elaborando y reelaborando a lo largo de dos centurias. Comenzado a historiar desde sus mismos inicios y convertido, después de alcanzada la independencia, en el momento fundacional por antonomasia del Estado mexicano al ser considerado como el que diera principio a la vida nacional, el interés por entenderlo y por explicarlo se ha mantenido hasta ahora con singular vigor. Prueba de ello son las innumerables publicaciones que sobre él contamos, aparecidas, sin interrupción, desde la segunda década del siglo XIX. Sin embargo, es quizá también uno de los períodos de la historia mexicana más necesitado de una profunda revisión, puesto que las explicaciones que de él tenemos no parecen dar ya cuenta de manera satisfactoria de lo que en la actualidad significa.

A lo anterior se debe en buena parte el renovado interés que desde hace tiempo se ha dado por estudiarlo, por abordar su problemática desde nuevas perspectivas y por analizar algunas de sus facetas todavía carentes o escasas de estudios, a lo que asimismo contribuyeron las celebraciones bicentenarias de 2010. Así, en los últimos años, y cada vez más, el acento se ha puesto en cuestiones de muy diversa índole, que van desde la política y la guerra hasta las finanzas y la economía, pasando por lo social y lo cultural o las singularidades regionales, lo que ha venido a poner de manifiesto tanto su riqueza y complejidad como lo esclarecedoras que resultan.