

Calendar

Mystery Sister

Celebrate the Poet-Nun

Known as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the poet-nun, who was born in 1648 in a Mexican village on the slope of a volcano, will be remembered this week with celebrations in Tijuana and elsewhere.

In her own time she was dubbed "the Tenth Muse." In ours she has been compared to another poet-nun, who lived in Spain in the century previous to Sor Juana's: Saint Teresa de Ávila.

To judge from the evidence — e.g., www.sappho.com — women especially admire the works of Sor Juana, and she has inspired a cult following, which is growing, its members more secular than religious. Numerous university websites revere her; Dartmouth College's refers to her as "a woman of genius."

LOCAL EVENTS

She is also honored as an early feminist — "the first defender of

women's rights in Latin America." Her response to a bishop who thought that women seeking knowledge were sinful has become a classic defense of the education of women. Published in 1691, "The Reply" appears in anthologies as an early "feminist manifesto."

Rosa Perelmuter, associate professor of Spanish at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is one of the Sor Juana scholars in Mexico this week. At two international conferences in Mexico City, Perelmuter will speak about the "mythification" of Sor Juana.

"Some people have elaborated beyond what we know about her," says the Cuban native who 20 years ago wrote her doctoral dissertation on Sor Juana and has studied her ever since. "The truth is that sure statements about her life are rather limited. There are only a few documents that discuss it, and one of them she wrote herself."

The stories about Sor Juana are irresistibly vivid. As a child, it is said, she refused to eat cheese, because she had been told it impeded the intellect. An early reader (at age three), she supposedly mastered Latin five years later — in 20 lessons — punishing herself for not learning fast enough by chopping off her hair. She didn't believe that an empty head should be beautifully adorned. Still not yet a teenager, she asked her mother if she could disguise herself in men's clothes in order to attend the then all-male university in Mexico City.



Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

The mythification of Sor Juana began in the 18th Century, says Perelmuter, because people stopped reading her in the original. Second- and third-hand versions were handed down. As a result, "all kinds of rumors were circulated." Forgotten were "her real-life circumstances."

Like Emily Dickinson, Sor Juana has been adopted by some who make claims about her sexuality. They point to the seeming love poems she wrote to the wives of viceroys and the "total disinclination to marriage" she professed in "The Reply."

"It's fashionable to portray her as a lesbian: it can make a headline," says Perelmuter. "I have no proof one way or the other, and it really doesn't

interest me very much. I'm more interested in her work. After all," she cautions those who would read too much into the poems, "they aren't necessarily autobiographical. She uses a poet's persona."

The location of one conference featuring Perelmuter is the former convent of San Jerónimo, where Sor Juana lived and wrote until she died, of the plague, in 1695. "Part of the place was destroyed, but part is still standing — the church and the cloister, although not exactly where Sor Juana's own cell was. It was renovated and turned into a university in 1979" — the Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana.

How can you separate fact from

fiction in a mythologized person's life? Read her own words, says Perelmuter, recommending the English translations by the late Alan S. Trueblood, published as *A Sor Juana Anthology* by Harvard University Press in 1988. "Trueblood did those translations when he was already pretty old, but they're wonderful. He was a poet, you know. He had a poet's ear."

Even those who won't be able to understand the poetry or the lectures in Spanish may be able to enjoy the upcoming concerts in Tijuana. The musical connection to Sor Juana is real enough. It's verified that she taught music at the convent and wrote plays that were set to music. She may also have composed music. And her poetry is known for its musical imagery.

This reader found nothing particularly musical on the sappho.com website, but she did find one called "You Men." The first and last stanzas go like this:

Silly, you men — so very adept
at wrongly faulting womankind,
not seeing you're alone to blame
for faults you plant in woman's mind.

I well know what powerful arms
you wield in pressing for evil:
your arrogance is allied
with the world, the flesh, and the devil!
— Jeanne Schinto

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Festival
Multiforo Instituto de Cultura de Baja California (ICBC)
Paseo del Centenario #10151, Zona Rio, Tijuana
Friday, November 9, 6:00 p.m.
Lecture by Manuel Acuña Borbolla
8:00 p.m. Guitar recital by Francisco Guerrero
Saturday, November 10, 7:00 p.m., Reading by María Eugenia Leefmans
8:00 p.m. Dramatization by Leefmans and Taller de Teatro de Tecate
Sunday, November 11, Noon
Puppet theater by Hugo Salcedo
Monday, November 12, 6:00 p.m.
Cello and piano recital by Jimena Jiménez Cacho and Claudio Herrera
8:00 p.m. Lecture by Gregorio Luque
Cost: recitals and dramatization: 50 pesos (approx. \$5.50); puppet theater: 20 pesos (approx. \$2); lectures and reading, free.
Info (Spanish only): 011-52-6-683-5922 or 011-52-6-684-8609; and www.tijuanaonline.org/espanol/home.htm.

Local Events
page 61

Classical Music
page 74

Art Museums & Galleries
page 77

Theater
page 79

Pop Music
page 84

Restaurants
page 109

Movies
page 120