PART IV

FULFILLMENT:
THE EXTENSION AND EXPRESSION OF THE
FEMALE BODY IN THE NEW WORLD
The nuns of the convents of New Spain were patrons and practitioners of a variety of art forms, including music, drama, architecture, painting, sculpture, and embroidery. This paper focuses on a cluster of innovative visual practices developed in and around the colonial convents by Mexico’s creole elite. These innovations began in the first half of the seventeenth century with the development of the escudo de monja (nun’s shield) hagiographic badge (Figs. 13.1 and 13.2). The escudo de monja was invented as a collaboration between the convents and a reform-minded episcopate. They were official commissions of the convents, or gifts to them, and remained convent property after the deaths of the nuns who wore them. In the eighteenth century, with the convents in decline and the creole elite struggling to deal with the reforms of the Bourbon monarchy, a second new genre of art, the monja coronada (crowned nun) portrait tradition was invented by the families of the nuns (Fig. 13.3). Monja coronada paintings put the image of the Mexican nuns and their distinctive costumes and ritual practices on permanent and near life-size display in the palatial homes of the creole elite. This new visual culture associated with the convents contributed to a local resistance to Spanish authority and to creole self-fashioning as a noble, courtly, and divinely elected people.

The first escudos de monjas appeared in the Mexican convents in the 1630s in response to restrictions of dress imposed upon the convents by the Spanish Archbishop of Mexico, Francisco Manso y Zuñiga (1587–1655). Manso y Zuñiga had arrived in Mexico in 1629 as a post-Tridentine bishop with a mandate for reform. The restructuring