

### **The Armada Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I.**

Elizabeth I was born in Greenwich on 7 September 1533 and was Queen of England and Ireland from 17 November 1558, until her death on 24 March 1603. Anne Boleyn was her mother and Henry VIII was her father. Elizabeth wasn't meant to be queen. Henry VIII was disappointed he did not father a male heir to the throne, and for a while removed her from the line of succession. When eventually crowned, Elizabeth forged her own identity and approach as queen and became one of the most successful and admired monarchs in history.

In 1588, Queen Elizabeth I gave a motivational speech to her troops at Tilbury in Essex as they prepared for the invasion of the Spanish Armada. The Spanish invasion was defeated and the victory greatly increased Queen Elizabeth's popularity. The 'Armada Portrait' was painted shortly after and was made as a celebration. The Spanish Armada of 1588 was the defining moment of Elizabeth I's reign. Spain's defeat secured Protestant rule in England and launched Elizabeth onto the global stage. The 'Armada Portrait' is in the collection of the National Maritime Museum, part of Royal Museums Greenwich.

Art is a powerful platform to communicate, challenge and explore ideas, raise awareness, and to provoke and offer multiple perspectives. The *Armada Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I* is packed with symbolism, of sovereign power, splendour and colonial ambition. Elizabeth had no social media or newspapers to broadcast her message, so the portrait was carefully constructed as a spectacle of female power to inspire awe and wonder. She was an image maker, ahead of her time in terms of public relations and the relationship she had with her people.

The subject of a portrait would often include objects that were important to them. These objects can help us imagine what historical figures were like. Elizabeth chose powerful symbols to express her identity and understood how to market herself as an established brand and forceful female leader. For instance, Elizabeth is draped in pearls which symbolise her purity. Elizabeth remained unmarried and therefore was perceived as pure. The sea scenes over her right shoulder represent the calm seas and English ships. Over her left shoulder, she turns away from the stormy waters where the

Spanish ships are struggling and shipwrecked against the rocks. The young people involved in this project suggested she was the enlightenment and calm between the two seas, and therefore this demonstrated her power as she is in control. Her hand on the globe suggests her authority and aspiration for power in the Americas. She had ambitions to establish an empire beyond Catholic Europe to significantly change England's position on the world stage. Elizabeth financially supported slave-trading missions in exchange for spices, sugars and pearls. These actions laid the foundations for the British Empire and the transatlantic slave trade which had a lasting legacy on the world today.

Elizabeth was a highly educated and accomplished woman, but as a female queen who restored England to Protestantism and faced Catholic assassins, she would have been in a perilous position, feeling insecure and vulnerable. Elizabeth is believed to have said in her famous Tilbury speech "*I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and a king of England too!*". Elizabeth used her femininity in a male-dominated environment to her advantage, seemingly to remind men she thought the same as them, and that being a female was a disadvantage. However, she used portraits and speeches to demonstrate she was an effective and powerful leader and that her strength and authority came from within. She wanted to look strong, beautiful and clever; maintaining her strong brand really was a matter of life and death. Elizabeth fashioned herself as both queen, represented by her crown, and prince, depicted in the ostrich feather. She dominates the composition with her physical presence. Her large sleeves suggest she is big and physically strong, and yet her jewels, luminous face, bows and cinched-in waist remind us of her femininity. The young people involved in this project identified this as a significant theme. They felt that to be taken seriously and achieve high status, Elizabeth was required to present herself as both male and female to show that her gender did not define her.

Queen Elizabeth I wore very elaborate garments and dressed to impress to communicate her wealth, luxury, status and global connections. As a follower of fashion her wardrobe was full of gowns made from rich fabrics adorned with jewels and elaborate surface detail, such as her sleeves and dress decorated with golden

suns. She would have worn a petticoat as underwear, a stiffened corset, stockings, a farthingale (a hooped skirt) a bodice and skirt or gown. Her shoes would have been made of the finest velvet and eventually leather. Her bodice would come to a point below the waist and she would have been able to alter her garments with different sleeves, bodices, skirts, ruffs and cuffs to update her look.

The circle of ruff extends from Elizabeth's face like the sun's rays or a divine halo to radiate an aura. Her ruffs were exceptionally elaborate, made in a variety of colours and decorated with lace, jewels and embroidery. Is she shown in the centre as a source of warmth, beauty and goodness, or did she have an enormous ego to portray herself as a celestial and powerful religious icon?

Elizabeth's life was spent living behind a mask, literally and metaphorically. We know she wore a lot of make-up that contained lead, that over time would have eaten and damaged her skin and led to health issues later in life. 'The Mask of Youth' is a term given to the portraits and miniatures of Queen Elizabeth I which adopted an idealised image as a template to suspend reality and control her image as an act of propaganda and preservation. She didn't like posing for portraits and 'The Mask of Youth' enabled her to maintain a strong profile of the unmarried and childless queen as still a forceful protector of the land. She prevented portraits that may have reflected her differently, and consequently she had control over what her portrait looked like. We could compare her to celebrities who edit and construct how they look in the media. Elizabeth knew that not only did her actions strengthen her position as Queen, but her image formed her identity. In the present day we can draw on parallels with social media and how we manipulate and curate images of ourselves.

Despite many challenges throughout her time on the throne, the period of Elizabeth's reign is now referred to as a 'Golden Age'. She was an extremely savvy manager of the royal court and saw England through a succession of religious, economic and political upheavals. Elizabeth modelled to the world the fact that women can cope, and indeed thrive, in power after all.