

The Armada Portrait

Analysis of a Pictorial Text

Cristina Vallaro

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

Cristina.vallaro@unicatt.it

The first thing a teacher should do is revise the idea of **text**:

- it is a **communication process**, extending from a sender to a receiver
- it exists thanks to a code, typical of a country, time, trend...
- it refers to some specific situation or content
- it carries a **message**

The point is to find out what the message is and explain it.

If a text is a communication process, can a portrait be a text as well?

To make the answer easier, just think about these points:

1. A portrait is normally made on someone's commission
2. It responds to the pictorial trends of some particular period or fashion
3. It can be made as a commemoration for some particular events
4. It 'means' something

All this is particularly true for a Renaissance portrait and can be applied to any Elizabethan portrait.

Let's see the portrait we are going to work on.



John Gower, *The Armada Portrait*, 1588.

First, the teacher should ask her students some questions about the sitter

(It could be a good way to brush up who this person was and what she did during her reign. The English teacher should work in tandem with the students' History teacher)

1. Who is the woman in the picture?
2. When did she live?
3. Why is she so famous as to deserve studying?
4. What is the most famous and important event of her reign?
5. Did she ever get married?
6. What do you remember about her and her reign?
7. Do you know any other portraits with Elizabeth I?
8. If so, can you find any elements they share?

In this phase, the teacher should ask some questions also about Art History:
(The teacher should work in tandem with the students' Art History teacher)

1. What do you know about Renaissance portraits in general?
2. Who wanted to be portrayed? Why?
3. Do you know who painted this portrait?
4. Is there any particular reason for its being made?
5. Which detail catches your attention in particular?

When this phase is over, the teacher can ask her students to look at the picture more closely and work on it as if it were a literary text. The next steps are as follows:

1. Look at the picture as a whole

- The technique
- The colours

2. Divide it into sections and focus on details

- Behind the queen
- The left hand side of the canvas (for the observer)
- The right hand side of the canvas (for the observer)
- The Queen

Section 1: Behind the queen



There are some ships at sea

It is a sunny day

The sea is calm

There are some ships at sea

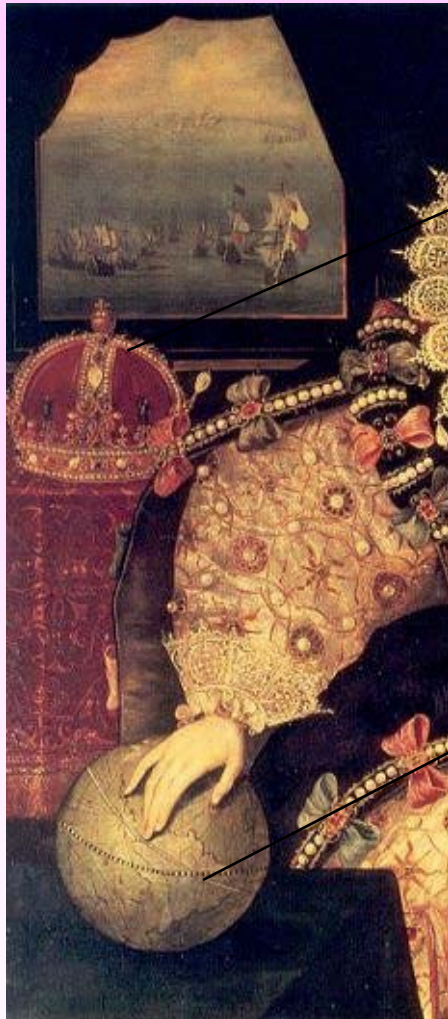
It is a stormy day

The sea is rough

The windows behind the queen allude to a sea battle. Can you guess which one?

Students are expected to remember the battle was won by the English. As a sign of this, the navy in the calm sea is the English one: it is triumphant and sailing in a peaceful and friendly sea. The other navy is the Spanish one: it has been defeated and is going back to Spain.

Section 2: What can we see in the left-hand side of the canvas?



There are two important objects:

1. The Crown.

- What kind of crown is it?
- What does it allude to?
- Who used crowns like this in the past?
- Justify its presence in this canvas.

2. The Globe.

- What is it a symbol for?
- The hand on it is pointing to a particular country. Which one and why?

To sum up:

1. The crown is a closed one, like Emperor Charles V' s imperial crown. In Renaissance Europe it was a clear symbol to express a monarch' s ambitions of empire.
2. The globe is put in a monarch' s hand during his coronation ceremony. It refers to the control a monarch is expected to exert over the world.

Both crown and globe are clear allusions to the Tudors' imperial ambitions.

The portrait is then celebrating Elizabeth I as Empress. Why? Did the English have a colonial empire?

Students should now remember the foundation of the first English colony (Virginia) in the New World in 1588.

Section 3: What can we see in the right hand side of the canvas?



The armrest has the shape of a siren.

- What was the siren a symbol for?
- Why was it placed in this canvas?

To sum up: the siren is a symbol of femininity and in this canvas it alludes to the queen's femininity and sensuality.

Section 4: Let's have a look at Queen Elizabeth

Pearls



Pale skin

Roses

Fan

The teacher should ask her students to explain the details they have noticed:

1. The Queen's pale skin

- A woman's pallor was often referred to as a female feature. It was a literary convention of that time. Do you remember anything more about this?
- It is a symbol of delicate femininity. Who was the mythological goddess it is linked to?
- What does the Moon have to do with the English queen?

2. Roses

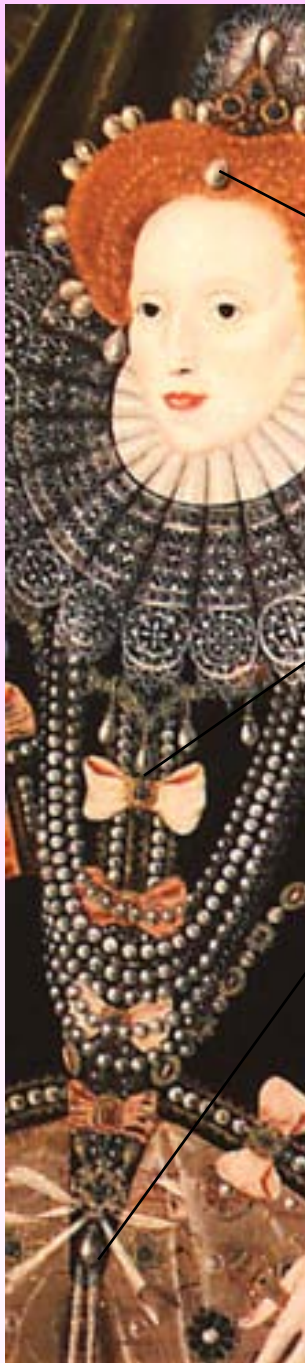
- They are a recurrent feature in Elizabeth's portraits. Why?
- What colour are the roses in the painting? Can you guess why?

3. Fan

- Do you know what it stands for?
- Why does Elizabeth have one?

4. Pearls

- They are a recurrent jewel in Elizabeth's portraits. What do they stand for?
- Why are there so many pearls?
- Can you notice whether they are the same size or whether some of them are bigger?



These pearls are bigger than the others and are placed in important places:

- The head = her mind
- The breast = her heart
- The pubic area = her sexuality

To sum up: The queen is pure in her thought, in her feelings and in her body. She is impregnable.

After analysing the portrait and its details, the teacher is expected to sum up the message of the portrait itself. Before doing this, she should point out that:

- The portrait was painted in 1588, after the victory over Spain
- The queen was becoming more and more popular among her subjects
- She was something more than an earthly creature, she was something like a goddess
- The colonial empire was starting to be true and real

The portrait means to celebrate the queen both as an empress and as a woman in her goddesslike features.

The teacher can now proceed to test her students and she can ask them to

- comment on this portrait
- comment on another portrait of Elizabeth I (she should choose among the most famous ones)
- compare this portrait to another
- speak/write about portraiture in Renaissance England/Europe
- compare Elizabeth to some contemporary women
- find out and explain all the symbols present in the portrait