



Gloriana: Elizabeth I and the Art of Queenship

Elizabeth I is one of our greatest monarchs. By the time of her death, in 1603, few in England could remember a time when they were not Elizabethans. Her long reign provided peace and stability, allowing the arts to flourish so that her era would prove to be a Golden Age. The cult of 'Gloriana' revered her as a virgin goddess, while her image increasingly relied on glittering jewels, gowns, and accessories. Art was a powerful device for propaganda and Elizabeth knew how to use it.

What were some of the common symbols used in portraiture of Elizabeth?

Pearls symbolise chastity and connect her to Cynthia, Greek goddess of the Moon, who was a virgin. Sir Walter Raleigh helped to promote the cult of Elizabeth as a moon goddess with a long poem he wrote during the late 1580s, *The Ocean's Love to Cynthia*, in which he compared Elizabeth to the **Moon**. Elizabeth was also associated with **Minerva** the Classic virgin-goddess of war and defender of the state. Although prepared for war, Elizabeth preferred peace. A **sieve** is a symbol of virginity and purity reaching back to Ancient Roman times and this was used in the famous Sieve portraits. **Flowers and fruit** – represent youth and fertility as seen in the Hampden portrait. The **Crown and sceptre** signified monarchy and body politic, as seen in the Darnley and Armada portraits. The **Globe** represents imperial ambitions and the Sword of State – justice. Bright skies and storm clouds (as in the Ditchley portrait) show Elizabeth controlling nature and also symbolise her forgiveness. **Black and white** were the colours of chastity and constancy. The **Tudor rose** refers to the Tudor dynasty. The rose also had religious connotations, as the medieval symbol of the Virgin Mary. The **pelican** was one of Elizabeth's favourite symbols and used to portray her motherly love to her subjects. A **phoenix** is a mythological bird which is a symbol of the Resurrection, endurance and eternal life. Only one phoenix lives at a time, so it symbolized Elizabeth's uniqueness. The **ermine**, according to legend would rather die than soil its pure white coat and it came to stand for purity. It was also a status symbol, as wearing ermine was restricted to royalty and high nobility. **Gloves** represented elegance and **olive branches** symbolised peace. An **armillary sphere** is a skeletal celestial globe used to represent and study the movements of the planets. It was used to represent wisdom and power and also as a symbol of the good relationship between Elizabeth and her courtiers. Her mother, Anne Boleyn had drawn a sphere in her book of hours. The most common interpretation of the sphere is to refer to the passing of time and the quality of constancy.

Where can you go to see some of the best images of Elizabeth – both portraits and miniatures?

Windsor Castle (Elizabeth as princess)

National Portrait Gallery (Coronation, Darnley, Phoenix, Armada, and Ditchley portraits. Also, Mary Queen of Scots, Robert Dudley, Philip Sidney, Francis Walsingham and Shakespeare)

Hatfield House (Rainbow and Ermine portraits)

The V&A for miniatures.

Elizabeth playing the lute is at Berkeley Castle.