

Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) with a hidden serpent

By an unknown artist

Oil on panel, c. 1580s–90s

Given by the Mines Royal, Mineral and Battery Societies, 1865

The portrait and its condition

This display has provided a rare opportunity to show this portrait in its unrestored condition. Due to loss of paint from the surface, it is now difficult to see how the painting would have originally looked. The composition was based on an existing portrait formula and numerous versions of this portrait type would have been painted, although very few survive today. Elizabeth is shown wearing the Lesser George, the medal signifying membership of the Order of the Garter, on a ribbon around her neck.

A portrait underneath

The recent technical analysis has shown that the portrait of Elizabeth has been painted over an unfinished portrait of an entirely different sitter. X-ray shows a female head in a higher position, facing in the opposite direction to the portrait of Elizabeth. The eyes and nose of the face underneath can now be seen where paint has been lost from Elizabeth's forehead. The lips and headdress can also be seen, as can the ruff which was positioned underneath Elizabeth's chin. The identity of the original sitter remains a mystery but the unfinished portrait appears to have been very competently painted, probably by a different artist. The original sitter appears to have been wearing a French hood of a type that was fashionable in the 1570s and 1580s, suggesting that there may have been a period of a few years before the panel was re-used. This discovery suggests that sixteenth-century panels were sometimes recycled by artists.



X-ray showing the unfinished portrait of a woman beneath the surface © National Gallery



Infra-red reflectogram showing the serpent held by the queen

(Image: Tager Stonor Richardson)

The serpent

The degradation of the paint in this portrait has also revealed that Elizabeth was originally painted holding a serpent, the outline of which has now become visible. A framed artist's impression (see far right) shows what this snake might have looked like when finished. This emblem was part of the original design and would have appeared mainly black with green and yellow scales. Elizabeth's fingers were originally clasped around the snake, rather than extended as they are now. At the final stage of the painting process, a decision was made to replace this emblem with a small bunch of roses, which are still partly visible.

The image of a serpent was an unusual choice. It was sometimes used to represent wisdom, prudence and reasoned judgement, all attributes with which Elizabeth would have wanted to be associated. However, in the Christian tradition, serpents or snakes have been used to signify Satan and original sin. The decision to remove the snake from this portrait, therefore, may have been due to the ambiguity of the emblem. Although there are a number of surviving versions of this portrait, none show Elizabeth holding a serpent.

(Image far right) An artist's impression of the hidden serpent from the portrait of Queen Elizabeth I

By Gillian Barlow

Watercolour and gouache

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