This remarkable painting is one of the most important surviving portraits of Elizabeth I. It was almost certainly painted from life and the resulting pattern for the queen’s face was to be repeated for the remainder of her reign. The queen is shown looking regal and remote, wearing a rather masculine doublet and carrying an ostrich-feather fan. The portrait is known as the ‘Darnley portrait’ after a previous owner.

By an unknown Flemish artist
Oil on panel, c.1575

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Changes in colour
The colours in this portrait have changed significantly over time. The recent analysis has shown that Elizabeth’s now extremely pale complexion would have been much rosier as the reds in the flesh paint have faded over time. The common assumption that Elizabeth always had very pale features appears to be a myth. However, we know that in the later part of her reign she did wear pale make-up.

The whole painting would have once been much more vibrant. The embroidery on the queen’s dress for example, would have appeared far richer and part of the golden brown pattern would have originally been crimson, perhaps with a purple tinge. The fading of an unstable blue pigment called ‘smalt’ has caused the colour to change over time.

Style and method
The recent analysis indicates that the picture may have been painted by a Flemish artist, perhaps one visiting England for a short period. Most of the painting seems to have been carried out by a single artist who worked rapidly and confidently. However, the crown on the table is by another painter and appears to have been added at a very late stage.

Analysis of the underdrawing has confirmed that part of this portrait was drawn freehand. A number of changes were made to the original design both in the drawing and painting stages. The recent research has also revealed that the position of her fan was altered during the painting process. It was originally smaller and positioned slightly higher, and the outline of a handle was drawn in but never painted.

The costume
The meanings conveyed through portraits of Elizabeth I relied greatly on her clothes and accessories. The masculinity of the queen’s Polish-style doublet in this portrait helps to create an image of a woman who is an equal among her male counterparts in other European countries. The luxurious silk of the dress and silver gilt thread on the sleeve reflect her wealth and style.

The pendant and the fan
The exquisitely painted pendant jewel hanging from the queen’s waist is a large red ruby surrounded by Roman gods. Minerva (the goddess of wisdom) is depicted at the top, Jupiter (ruler of the gods) of at the base and Venus (goddess of love), Cupid and Mars (gods of love and war) at the sides. Elizabeth was highly educated and it is possible that this jewel refers to her classical learning.

Who may have commissioned the portrait?
It is likely that this portrait was commissioned by a courtier close to the queen and it is possible that the pendant or the fan may have been a gift from that person. It was the custom for courtiers and members of the nobility to give the queen gifts at New Year. Elizabeth’s favourite, the Earl of Leicester, gave the queen a fan at New Year 1573–4 and there are records of various other fans that were given to her around this time. Unfortunately, none of the descriptions exactly match the fan in this portrait.