



EXHIBITION REVIEW – *Elizabeth* at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

Hugh Macrae Richmond

University of California at Berkeley, USA
hmr@uclink4.berkeley.edu

On 21 September 2003 at the conclusion of the exhibition at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich about Queen Elizabeth I, on the four-hundredth anniversary of her death, its guest curator David Starkey gave an epilogue in which he explained how he replaced the project's original designer, Roy Strong. As a previous director of the National Portrait Gallery, Strong had planned to present an exhibition of portraits of Elizabeth, but Starkey felt that the presentation would gain if such items were set broadly in their historical context. Thus he created a series of themes around which he could build the background to the main centres of interest in Elizabeth's career. The selected topics were 'The Young Elizabeth', 'Elizabeth's England; the Early Years of her Reign', 'The Queen's Court: Selected Aspects of Elizabeth's Life', 'Elizabeth's Adventurers: Imperial Ambition and Exploration', 'Representing the Queen: Elizabeth's Iconography', 'Threats to the Crown: Mary Queen of Scots, and the Spanish Armada', and 'Elizabeth's Final Years'.

The context of Elizabeth's youth was introduced by the Earl of Pembroke's armour reflecting the militarism of Tudor aristocracy, as did a jewelled Turkish dagger resembling one belonging to her father Henry VIII. Portraits of Henry and Anne Boleyn defined the future Queen's parentage, reinforced by coins showing the happy pair; but these were

accompanied by a jewel Anne received from Henry, which she gave to the officer of the guard on the morning of her execution. Other vestiges of the period included a manuscript by William Latymer referring to Anne, and a prayer book given by Elizabeth to her father. The earliest portraits of the young Elizabeth were matched with ones of her brother Edward, her sister Mary with her husband, Philip II of Spain, and Thomas Seymour, whose ominous relationship with Elizabeth is documented in her letters defending herself from participation in Seymour's plans to marry her.

Coverage of Elizabeth's earlier reign began with coronation portraits, clothes of the period, including the staff of office illustrated in a portrait of her Lord Privy Seal, Sir Nicholas Bacon. Coins stressed the economic life of the time followed by documents and official items from the City of London. An Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer, a Bishops' Bible and church plate signalled contemporary religious practices. The section on the Queen's court included portraits and letters of such suitors as the Earl of Leicester and the Duke of Anjou; of courtiers like Sir Henry Lee and accoutrements such as a garter badge, suits of armour, drinking cups and trenchers, cutlery, musical instruments, jewellery, gloves, a medal celebrating Elizabeth's recovery from smallpox, and related letters.

The theme of empire deployed the relevant maps, instruments, and records of the Age of Discovery, with portraits of such relevant figures both military and scientific as Drake, Hatton, Hawkins, Frobisher, Raleigh, Gilbert and Dee, accompanied by such personal items as Drake's locket jewel (seen in his portrait), his Sun Jewel, drinking cups, and illustrations of the new cultures discovered.

Items 'Representing the Queen' highlighted several notable portraits with related medals, jewels, musical instruments, and documents. These led to more ominous items in 'Threat to the crown' reflecting such challenges as those offered by Mary Queen of Scots (whose career and fate were amply illustrated, and documented) and the Spanish Armada (set in its full European context of the religious wars). Samples recovered from Armada wrecks included instruments, jewels and utensils. The last set of

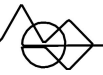
materials dealt with the role of the Earl of Essex, the death of Elizabeth and the succession of King James I, including portraits, documents, and illustrations and descriptions of the funeral.

The catalogue (287 pages, with bibliography and index, published by Chatto and Windus) includes data about each of the 170 major items, plus essays on related topics by David Starkey, the curator, Susan Doran, the editor, and 10 other experts in the various fields. There is also a brief exhibition guide, a pamphlet with summary introductions to each section and useful transcripts of key documents.

The overall effect of the exhibition was to present a vivid sequence of impressions of Elizabeth herself, backed in depth by material about her associates and her cultural context, often strikingly illustrated by artefacts personally associated with the queen and



Figure 1 Unidentified artist, English school, *English Ships and the Spanish Armada, August 1588*, c 1590, oil on panel. © National Maritime Museum, London



individuals of her court. Several of these items are normally in private collections and not accessible to the public, so that there were frequent surprises even for the well-informed, such as Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder's *Elizabeth with an Olive Branch* (1565) and George Gower's two portraits, *Elizabeth I with a Sieve* (1579) and *Elizabeth in her Robes of Office* (c 1580-90). However, perhaps the fullest representation of any aspect of Elizabethan culture was that addressing exploration, understandable in view of the immediately available resources of the exhibition's setting in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. This apt venue now occupies the original site of Greenwich Palace, the place of Elizabeth's birth and one of the Tudors' principal residences.

Of the success of Starkey's plan there can be no doubt: the context of the portraits greatly deepened one's awareness of the

detailed texture of Elizabethan life and clarified the nature of the Queen, her experiences, and her associates. As a result one could detect details and meanings in the primary portraits of the Queen that might otherwise have passed unnoted. One implication of the items pictured in the paintings is the purely documentary aspect of much of the art, including the royal portraits which were obviously designed with political, religious or other ideological intentions. For example, the nautically exact picture of the Armada in the English Channel, figure 1, includes one ship in the foreground clearly manned by the traditional crew of the Ship of Fools. The idea of art for art's sake was hardly a recognisable aesthetic at that time.

The exhibition Elizabeth was at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London from 1 May to 14 September 2003.