

**ENGLISH SCHOOL c.1558**  
**Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I (1533 – 1603)**

*Oil on panel*

23 1/8 x 17 3/8 inches, 59 x 44 cm

*Inscribed;* ELIZABETHE REGINA

*Provenance*

By descent in an English Private Collection

This portrait, previously unknown, is one of only a handful of images that show Elizabeth I at the outset of her reign in 1558. She is shown in a simple black costume with an ermine trim, and holds a pair of gloves in one hand and a prayer book in the other. The portrait is surprisingly un-regal, and were it not for the well established dating of this portrait type, one might find it hard to believe that this austere looking young woman had just acceded to the throne of England. After all, the best known portraits of Elizabeth present her as the 'Gloriana' figure so well known to history; an ageless symbol of a nation, immersed in jewels and rich costume.

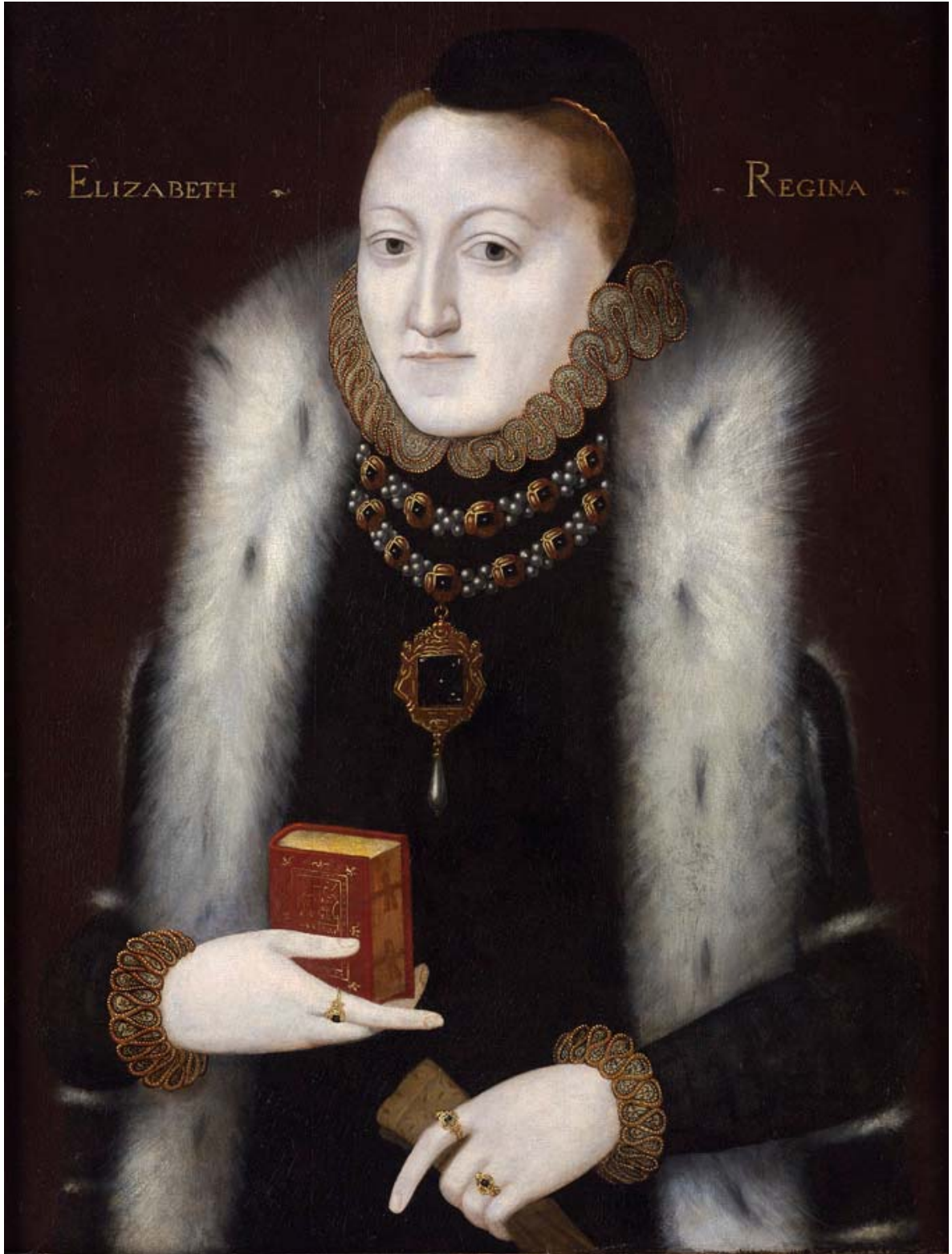
However, despite its austerity, the present portrait would have had a clearly defined purpose at the time of its commission. We cannot be entirely certain as to what exactly this was, but it must, given the 'props' seen in the picture, have centered on religion. Under Elizabeth's sister Mary, England had undergone a forced programme of religious change designed to return the country to the Catholic fold after the Reformation introduced by Henry VIII and continued by Edward VI. The key question at Elizabeth's accession in 1558 was which religious direction she would chose to take the country towards. It has been argued, therefore, that these early portraits of Elizabeth attempted to portray the new Queen as committed to spreading the English vernacular, and thus continuing the work of Henry and Edward. In this case, the royal coat of

arms on the book in the present portrait could allude to the Book of Common Prayer first made available in English under Edward in 1549.

One could equally argue that the picture's message is one of religious conviction in general, and simply attests to Elizabeth's seriousness of purpose. There was also the question of Elizabeth's sex to address, for Mary had unfortunately set a bad precedent as England's first queen regnant, and 1558 saw the publication of John Knox's infamous *First Blast of the Trumpet Against The Monstrous Regiment of Women*.



**Figure 1**



Elizabeth therefore had little choice but to present herself as a pious, solemn monarch. It would have been entirely appropriate that the first images of Elizabeth as Queen presented her as solemnly dressed and holding a religious book in an obvious display of her piety. But this could be the limit of any religious interpretation. There was little appetite for the extreme religious changes Edward or Mary had tried to introduce, and the prospect of the religious pendulum again swinging violently from one extreme to the other was widely feared. Elizabeth's religious settlement in 1558-9 was swift but relatively conservative.

In any case, it is clear even in these early images that Elizabeth understood the power of portraiture. Like all the Tudors, she knew well the value of making her subjects aware of her identity, and the context in which it was projected. Her grandfather, Henry VII, was the first monarch to put his own accurate portrait on the English coinage, while her father, Henry VIII, seized on Holbein's ability to present himself as a strong and majestic ruler in numerous official portraits. As can be seen throughout her reign, Elizabeth repeatedly mobilised her own image as a symbol of royal authority in a conscious demonstration that, despite being a woman, she was the natural and legitimate ruler of England. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these early portraits, however, is their presentation of Elizabeth the woman, rather than Elizabeth the symbol.

The present portrait is one of only a handful of certainly known versions of this likeness. This portrait type has come to be known as the 'Clopton' type, after the previous location at Clopton Hall of the largest of the four examples. The other versions are a small head in the National Portrait Gallery, the present

version, and two other similar, though not certainly dated, examples; one sold at Sotheby's in 1996, and another at the Guildhall, Thetford. Dendrochronological analysis of the present example gives an earliest possible felling date for the oak panels as 1535, and a most plausible creation date of 1552 upwards.

Recent further analysis and conservation suggests strongly that this is the earliest example of its type, and occupies a key place in the genesis of these early Elizabethan images. X-ray and infra-red examination has revealed another complete portrait of Elizabeth underneath the present picture, in which she is seen looking directly at the viewer. The costume appears to be more flamboyant, with a larger ruff and elaborate sleeves. Elizabeth's hands are differently placed, and there is no book. The picture bears a close resemblance to what must now be considered an earlier likeness of Elizabeth, probably painted before she became Queen, an example of which can be found at Hever Castle in Kent (Figure 1). Another, more flattering example of this 'face-on' type can be seen in the 'Coronation Portrait' of Elizabeth in the National Portrait Gallery, a picture thought to be a later copy c.1600 of a lost original, but which, in the opinion of the present author, may well be a contemporary portrait, albeit much over-painted.

For whatever reason, the earlier 'face-on' portrait type may have been judged improper shortly after Elizabeth's accession, and a desire must have been expressed for a more formal and becoming image of the new Queen in keeping with the new religious settlement. The result is an early example of a political makeover; the prayer book was added, and the costume reduced. (The process was not new; in Mary's reign precisely the



opposite process had been applied to a portrait of Henry VIII in which an English Bible had been over-painted, on Bishop Gardiner's orders, with a pair of gloves.) The other versions were therefore possibly worked up from the present example. The change in the angle of Elizabeth's face is also interesting, and implies an aesthetic alteration. Almost all Elizabeth's portraits after this date show Elizabeth's face at a slight angle away from the viewer. Was the initial, face-on portrait, of the type begun by Henry VIII and Holbein, deemed too unflattering for, or by the Queen?

In any event, the present portrait type was short-lived. Little is known of the artists at court in Elizabeth's reign, but it

is clear that at the outset of her rule there was no portraitist of any great ability until the Flemish painter 'Stephen' arrived from the Low Countries in c.1560. The present portrait may well be of the type referred to rather disparagingly by Margaret of Parma in 1567 as showing the Queen 'in blacke with a hoode and a cornet.' Certainly, by continental standards the quality would have been disappointing. But by English standards, where the emphasis was as much on the political impact of the picture as its artistic quality, the considerable reworking of this portrait suggests that it was considered to be an important moment in the development of Elizabeth's iconography.