Westminster Abbey
Learning

Elizabeth I image comparison activity – teachers' notes

Thank you for downloading this resource. We hope that it will be a useful teaching tool in your classroom.

As we continue to grow our free catalogue of teaching resources, we'd really appreciate a few minutes of your time to let us know what you liked and what could be improved. Please complete this five-question survey.

Elizabeth I (reigned 1558 – 1603) was the last of the Tudor monarchs. She came to the throne upon the death of her half-sister Mary I, and inherited a country facing problems with religion, poverty and foreign policy. Elizabeth's long reign is often considered a 'Golden Age' in English history and is remembered for key events such as the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots and voyages of exploration. Famous writers such as William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser were active during her reign, and she famously never married, despite having several favourites.

Elizabeth I was a skilled propagandist; she was partly responsible for the creation of the 'Cult of Gloriana' and she famously controlled her image using costume, hair, jewellery and art. Paintings contained symbols to represent particular messages that she wanted to convey. At the time, many people believed that outer appearance reflected inner personality, and this belief greatly influenced Elizabeth's way of presenting herself. Many English people would have never seen Elizabeth in the flesh, and so Elizabeth used this opportunity to present herself in a flattering and positive light.

This activity asks students to study different images of Elizabeth I – all of which can be found at the Abbey – and consider what each one tells us about how Elizabeth was viewed at the time the image was made.

You might wish to start this activity by reading a contemporary description of Elizabeth I. Ask students to listen carefully to each description and then discuss what they think Elizabeth was like.

There are several different ways of completing this activity:

- Print out the images onto A3 paper, and have students write their thoughts down around each image. Set it up as a carousel activity, with groups moving around the room until they have viewed all the images.
- Have students pick two images and conduct an in-depth comparison. You might wish to create a table and then use the suggested questions to structure the activity.

The suggested questions are at the end of these notes. Ask students to think about ***how*** Elizabeth is being described, consider ***who*** is writing the description and ***when*** it was written.

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Contemporary descriptions of Elizabeth I

'She is tall with good skin…she has fine eyes and above all, beautiful hands…Her intellect and understanding are wonderful…Proud and haughty…' **Giovanni Michieli, Venetian ambassador (May 1557 report)**

'On her head she wore a great reddish-coloured wig…As for her face, it is very aged. Her teeth are very yellow and irregular…Many of them are missing, so that one cannot understand her easily when she speaks.' **French ambassador (1595 report to the French king)**

'Her face was oblong, fair but wrinkled; her eyes small, yet black and pleasant; her nose a little hooked, her lips narrow…her hair…an auburn colour, but false.' **Paul Heutzner, German visitor who met Elizabeth in 1598**

Background notes

Image 1a – Elizabeth I painting

This oil painting on panel is dated 1595 and was given to the Abbey by Dean Joseph Wilcocks, according to the inscription on the back. The inscription shows it was painted in the 37th year of her reign. She holds a glove in her left hand and a fan in her right.

Image 1b – Elizabeth I painting

This is the original face for the previous portrait. The face of the elderly queen was painted over to make her look younger, probably in 1760.

Image 2 – Elizabeth I funeral effigy

The funeral effigy of Elizabeth I has a wax head and hands, with the body being made of wood and soft materials. The original effigy was remade in 1760, but during restoration in 1995 it was found that the original corset and drawers from 1603 still survived. The corset is now displayed near to the wax effigy in the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries.

Image 3 – Elizabeth I stained-glass window

This window, which can be found over the entrance to the Chapter House, dates from the late 19th century. It is one of only a few windows that survived the Second World War undamaged.

Image 4 – The Essex ring

The ring is believed to have been given by Queen Elizabeth to her favourite courtier, Robert Devereux the Earl of Essex. Colourful portrait miniatures were often painted on vellum (animal skin). They might be given already set into a piece of jewellery, although often they came unframed, and the recipient then paid for the jewellery that would hold it.

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Image 5 – Elizabeth I tomb effigy

King James VI/I erected the large white marble monument to Elizabeth I. The recumbent effigy resembles portraits of the queen in old age. In 1606 the queen's coffin was transferred to a vault below the new monument and placed on top of the coffin of her half sister Mary I. The regalia and jewellery (not shown in this image) are replacements dating from the 1970s.

Symbolism in the images

- **Elaborate dresses and jewellery** – Elizabeth is usually depicted wearing elaborate dresses and lots of jewellery, indicating her wealth, and therefore her power.
- **Coronation Regalia** – Elizabeth is often shown wearing the crown and holding the orb and sceptre. These are symbols of her power as a monarch and show that she is wedded to this role.
- **Pearls** – Elizabeth is often depicted wearing pearls, which are a symbol of virginity. She wanted to be depicted as 'The Virgin Queen', married to no-one but England.
- **Gloves** – A sign of elegance. Elizabeth was fond of holding them to show off her long white hands. It is said that she was very vain about them.
- **Ermine** – Legend says that the ermine (a small weasel species whose coat turns white in winter and was prized historically for its fur) was willing to die rather than dirty its pure white coat, and it therefore symbolises Elizabeth's virtue and purity.
- **Fan of feathers** – The exotic feathers, imported from the New World, represent England's overseas expansion.

<u>Suggested questions</u>

How realistic do you think the image is and why?

What symbolism can you see in each image?

How did Elizabeth portray herself in her lifetime?

How did others depict Elizabeth during her lifetime?

How has Elizabeth been depicted in the years after her death?

Why might Elizabeth be depicted in a certain way?

What message is the artist trying to convey?

Have depictions of Elizabeth changed over time? ***Why*** do you think this is?

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