

The importance of the Tyrwhitt Drake Armada Portrait  
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[The Tyrwhitt Drake Armada portrait](#) of Elizabeth I has been put up for sale by the descendants of Sir Francis Drake who have owned this painting since 1775.

Of the three Armada portraits, it is by far, the most superior. Like the other two, it is dripping in symbolism, but there are subtle differences between the two landscape format paintings and similarities between [The Woburn Abbey Armada Portrait](#) and that held by the National Portrait Gallery (NPG). The NPG painting has been cut down at some time, probably because it did not fit a certain space [NPG portrait](#). What remains in the NPG version is the central figure of the queen and some elements of the background similar to the Woburn Abbey version. These elements are the columns of red with gold coloured bases, which suggests these two paintings may have come from the same workshop.

In 1563 Sir William Cecil drew up a draft proclamation regarding the use of the queen's portrait because there were so many portraits that bore no resemblance to her. There was no official template for a royal portrait; neither was there a 'special person' appointed to provide an approved template for use by artists' workshops. It was not until later in her reign that George Gower was appointed Serjeant Painter, and Nicholas Hilliard became her sole portrayer in miniature portraits. Both were Englishmen, and Hilliard, like Sir Francis Drake, was a Devon man.

In my opinion, a superior artist has painted the Tyrwhitt-Drake portrait. If you compare the rendition of the faces of the three portraits, you will see what I mean. The common factor in all three versions is that the queen is in  $\frac{3}{4}$  profile facing to the left, similar to the Hilliard's [Phoenix Portrait](#) of c1573 that hangs in Tate Britain.



Figure 1a Tyrwhitt Drake face of Elizabeth



Figure 2b Hilliard's Phoenix portrait

In figure 1a, the modelling of the features is more realistic. In the two other portraits, the modelling of the face is flat.

This begs the question of just who provided the portrait template and who painted the face in the Tyrwhitt Drake portrait? The cast shown on the queen's right eye suggests to me that Hilliard may have provided the portrait template. The NPG's x-ray examination of the Phoenix portrait by their conservation department has revealed how the position of the queen's right eye was altered before that portrait was painted. By the 1580s, Hilliard had created the concept of a



Figure 4a Woburn version



Figure 3b NPG version

Mask of Youth as a way of portraying an aging (and vain) Elizabeth I and there are many of examples of his work showing the queen in just this  $\frac{3}{4}$  profile view.

The realistic modelling of the Tyrwhitt Drake version suggests the artist was perhaps one of the Netherland artists who were resident in London, such as Marcus Gheerhaerts the Younger, who created [The Ditchley Portrait](#) of Elizabeth for Sir Henry Lee. Perhaps the Tyrwhitt Drake portrait was painted by Hilliard's one-time apprentice, Isaac Oliver, who is now thought to be the brush who created The Rainbow Portrait of Elizabeth that hangs at Hatfield House ([The Rainbow Portrait](#)). Oliver married Gheerhaerts's half-sister, Sarah,

so from this snippet of 'behind the scenes' information we can deduce that members of the London artistic elite were closely connected.

There has been a lot of discussion about certain minor elements of these paintings. In particular the ruff, which has been described as symbolising the rays of the sun. Hilliard's portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh ([Sir Walter Raleigh c 1584 - Nicholas Hilliard](#)) shows Raleigh wearing a similar ruff



Figure 6a Tyrwhitt Drake ruff

If you look closely at the lace on the ruff, there are subtle differences in the patterns.

It is the central roundel of the ruff of the Tyrwhitt Drake portrait that differs from the other two. Anyone who has made bobbin lace will recognise just what a tour de force this ruff is. In the Woburn & NPG



Figure 5b Woburn Ruff

versions, the delicate frame concentrated glittering and majesty.



Figure 7c NPG ruff

artists have made the ruff a for the queen's face and have on making the dress a statement of wealth, power,

In the Tyrwhitt Drake portrait, the ruff is very substantial, and the central patterns of each roundel differ from the other two as if the artist has had access to the original piece of clothing. While the figure of the queen is central within the painting, she is part of the whole. She does not dominate it as she does in the other versions. Sometimes a ruff is just a ruff.

However, the emblems of the embroidered sun on the sleeves of Elizabeth's gown are there for a reason. They symbolise the importance of the queen to the life of the nation just as the sun is important for our daily life on earth. Each embroidered sun has a diamond at its centre. The use of pearls and precious stones and where they are placed on this gown are all very carefully chosen. In this instance diamonds were chosen because they represent

constancy and therefore represent the constancy of Elizabeth's dedication to her nation, which is as assured as the everyday rising of the sun.

Diamonds are not the only precious gems on this dress. Pearls, an extremely ancient symbol of purity, chastity and the moon, abound. Red rubies represent the blood sacrificed by Christ. All three gems appear either on the dress or in the centre of the bows. To a modern fashion eye, it might seem that this is a gown that would be better with less adornment, but this is not a fashion statement.

Let us now look at the other common details of these paintings, i.e. the imperial crown, the columns in the NPG & Woburn versions, & the finial of the chair/throne we see to the right of Elizabeth.



The imperial crown appears on many of the front pages of the *Coram Rege* rolls long before these paintings were created.<sup>i</sup> This is a symbol of England's overseas territories that had been in use long before these portraits were painted. In particular, it appears above the illuminated P depicting the accession of Mary I in 1553. The loss of Calais (England's last overseas possession) to the French caused Mary such sorrow that she stated that when she died and was opened up, the name of Calais would be found graven on her heart. It appears, therefore, that the use of the closed crown is usual when portraying the English monarch. The placing of it immediately behind the globe sends an overt message to the viewer.

In our study, Elizabeth stands centre stage; her hand resting on the globe. Her stance is reminiscent of the first full-length portrait of her known as [The Hampden Portrait](#).<sup>ii</sup> The similarity of stance is further evidence of the tight control that governed official portraits of the queen after 1563.

It is suggested that Elizabeth's hand specifically covers the state of Virginia, named in her honour by Sir Walter Raleigh. In 1583 Raleigh had been granted a charter 'to plant a colony' north of Florida, which was held by the Spanish. The following year he sent an expedition to the East Coast and a group of settlers made their home on Roanoke Island in today's Dare County in North Carolina. The mystery of what happened to his colony has never been solved. It was not until 1607 that the first permanent English settlement was founded at Jamestown, Virginia. This was financed by The London Company (aka Charter Company of Virginia Company of London) founded in 1606 in the early years of the reign of James I, hence the name of the first permanent settlement. Whatever the reality, the use of the imperial crown in the three Armada portraits demonstrates that by 1588 England had recovered her status as an imperial power. What is also implicit by the queen's hand resting on the globe is that

England did not just defeat the Spanish Armada in the summer of 1588, but is of sufficient might to challenge the Spanish elsewhere in the world and is an emergent world power.

The names of Drake, Hawkins, Frobisher and Raleigh have rung down the ages as maritime heroes. Early modern English history resounds with their stories of their exploration of the globe, settlement in the New World, the seeking of the North West Passage and various confrontations with the Spanish treasure fleet. These paintings are also a commemoration of their collective bravery fighting off the Armada.

Philip II of Spain considered Vice Admiral Drake to be a pirate and offered a staggeringly high reward for his capture. From the stories and various naval expeditions against the Spanish leading up to the summer of 1588, it is apparent that Drake liked nothing better than to irritate the King of Spain at every available opportunity. His capture of the 120-ton galleon, La Nuestra Señora de la Concepción (called the Cacafuego by the English<sup>iii</sup>) hit the Spanish treasury hard. The galleon was laden with treasure and Drake captured here near the islands called the Esmeraldas on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1579. This was during his circumnavigation of the globe, and when he landed in Plymouth in the September of 1580, one of the first questions he asked was if Elizabeth was still Queen of England. Various members of Court had invested in Drake's venture: he renamed his ship the Golden Hind in honour of Christopher Hatton, whose emblem was a hind. Elizabeth had also invested some of her personal money. The value of this haul is unknown because the queen ordered that this was never to be disclosed. Cecil (by then Lord Burleigh) wanted to have the spoils returned to Spain in order to appease Philip, but this never happened. This suggests that the equivalent value in today's money must have been in the tens of millions!

Let us return to the mundane contemplation of the chair. In all three paintings, it is placed to the right of Elizabeth. If we study the placing of this chair it is apparent that we are not shown it in its entirety. This is very clear in the Woburn portrait. On the back of the red fabric-covered chair is an egg-shaped finial. This sits on the left-hand side of this chair. To the right is the base of one of the columns. Whether this is a pomegranate or an egg is up for the individual to decide. Perhaps it is just a finial on a very expensive piece of furniture.

Likewise, the mermaid is a typical Renaissance piece of decoration. Those who have visited Cardinal Wolsey's surviving room in Hampton Court will remember the frieze



that runs around the room just above the paintings. Here is an example of the type of Renaissance decoration that was commonplace in Europe during the late 15<sup>th</sup> & early 16<sup>th</sup> century, but when Cardinal Wolsey was building Hampton Court Palace this style was completely new to England.<sup>iv</sup>

Another example of an elaborate chair leg is seen in the illuminated E for the Indenture for the founding of the Poor Knights of Windsor. Here the queen



sits on a throne that has legs carved in the Italianate Renaissance style. You might also observe that the queen is also wearing an imperial crown.<sup>v</sup> Together with the expensive fabric and use of the Italianate Renaissance grotesque motif of a mermaid to form the front leg of the chair, we are being made aware of the exclusive nature of this type of furniture. The use of a mermaid may be a deliberate reference to the destructiveness of women, but I think this unlikely. If the artist intended this, it is possible that such a visual reference might have been misinterpreted by the queen as a comment on her destructiveness. If we consider what was an

important part of education of the time, anyone knowing their Ovid or any of the other classical Roman and Greek authors would recognise mermaids, tritons & mermen as subjects of Poseidon, god of the sea. When commanded by the god, it was their job to stir up storms and mermaids, in particular, to lead men to a watery grave. My opinion is that either of these suggestions are an over analysis of the peripheral imagery, and the placement of this chair is more to do with demonstrating wealth and power than any arcane covert message, especially about the destructive nature of women. However, those of us with a classical education might consider this as a reference to the destructiveness of those beings commanded by a god. Now that is even more arcane, but more in keeping with the puzzles set in Elizabethan times. The visual reference may now be interpreted that the queen is on her throne by divine right and therefore appointed by God, who also commands the wind and the waves!

There are other similarities in the Woburn & NPG portraits, which differ in a fundamental way to the painting that may be lost to the nation. For instance, columns appear in both the NPG cut down version & the Woburn version. This suggests that these two paintings have either come from the same workshop, or that the artists collaborated in the design. In the Tyrwhitt Drake portrait we look through windows and there are no columns to be seen. This raises the question of whether this painting was painted earlier than the other two, or perhaps slightly later. Was this a different artist/workshop? Who created the original layout? Why are there such blatant differences?

The P on the Coram Rege roll for the [Easter Term of 1589](#) shows Elizabeth seated on her throne with pillars to the rear. The inclusion of these columns on something that would be seen mostly by lawyers, suggests that whoever painted the NPG & Woburn versions were also part of an elite artistic group that was commissioned by those at the top of society. This does not help us in identifying just who painted these two portraits; it merely adds the name of George Gower to the mix. He had been appointed Serjeant Painter to the Court in 1581.

In the NPG portrait, we can only catch a glimpse of the scenes to the right and left of the queen. Thanks to the vandalism of an earlier time this makes it difficult to make a comment about this aspect of this painting. The only ship visible on the NPG portrait shows it is flying a pennant that has a white ground and a red cross and is sailing away from whatever is happening in the background. The sea has been rendered more realistically to that in the Woburn Abbey version, which is an unlikely custard colour.



However, we cannot discount that this pigment may have undergone a slow chemical change over the centuries bringing about this unusual colour for a sea. The scene to the right of the queen in the NPG painting has virtually disappeared completely so we are unable to make any comparison to either of the other paintings.

We can compare the Woburn Abbey painting with the Tyrwhitt Drake version



like for like. This is the scene to the left on the Woburn Abbey portrait. Certain descriptions show that, like its counterpart, this scene depicts Drake's fire ships going in to Calais and the Spanish fleet in the foreground scattering. These vessels fly a pennant on their topmasts, which show a red cross on a white background. The red cross of the flag echoes the cross on the top of the imperial crown that sits in front of this scene. I have chopped this screenshot deliberately to show this as the cross on the top of the crown just cuts into the yellow sea. The scene is a very stylistic rendition of a sea battle in comparison to the portrait now up for sale. Likewise, looking at the scene on the right we can identify a ship as being the same as that seen in the centre of the scene on the custard-coloured sea from the very obvious bow with the round anchor port. There is another ship to the left of centre on the yellow sea as it has a distinctive aftercastle, similar to the one on the left of the other scene.

What I find curious is that these ships in the left-hand scene are clearly flying the English flag – a white ground with the red cross of St George. Are the ships really Spanish ships sailing away from fireships as has been suggested in some descriptions of this painting?

There is a document in the British Library: ref Add Ms 22047, called the Anthony Rolls that has illustrations of various Tudor ships including this one of the Mary Rose. The Mary Rose famously sank in the Solent in 1545.<sup>vi</sup> I have included this image of her so you



can see the English flags quite clearly as well as being able to examine a contemporary image of Henry's famous ship.

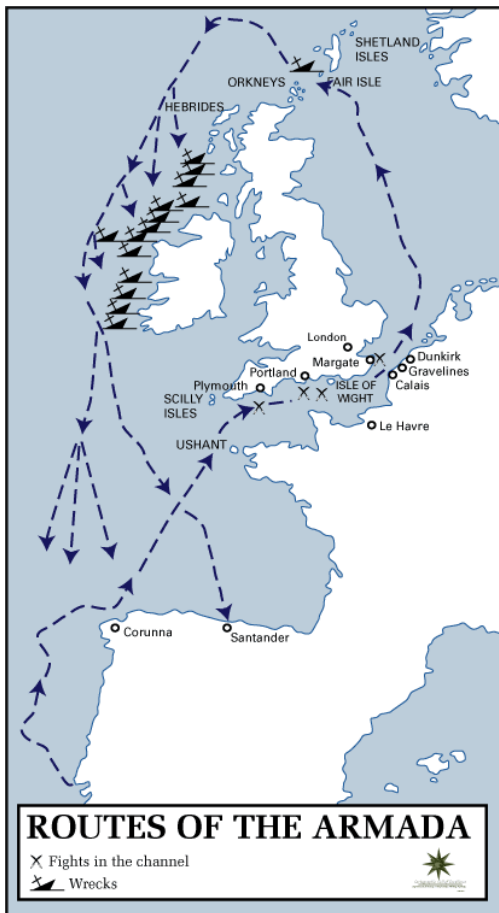
Vice Admiral John Hawkins was responsible for the upgrading of existing ships and designing new ones for Her Majesty's Royal Navy. It was Hawkins's faster and more nimble vessels that harried the Spanish fleet, chasing them up the English Channel.

There is another painting celebrating another victory against the Spanish fleet. This one (click on the date below) commemorates the British fleet's engagement off Portland on [23rd July 1588](#), where Drake captured one of the Spanish ships. This painting is similarly irritatingly attributed to the anonymous British School. However, it illustrates very clearly the different types of vessels and the various flags and pennants of both the English and the Spanish fleets. The Spanish flags include those of the House of Hapsburg, as well as that of the Pope. What is noticeably absent from the Woburn painting is any reference to the English allies – the Dutch - but at the top right of this painting we see a ship flying a flag with a white ground, blue horizontal stripes and a central white square with a red cross. Perhaps this is a Dutch vessel?

In c1601 the Dutch artist, Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom (1562/3-1640), painted a celebration of the Dutch participation and victory over the Spanish Armada. [The Dutch Engaging the Spanish Armada 1601](#). Ever since the rebellion of the United Provinces in 1568 against Hapsburg rule, the Dutch had been resisting the Spanish forces. The plan was for the Duke of Alva's forces to be transported by the Spanish fleet across the Channel. As history relates this did not happen, and the Spanish fleet was engaged in battle off the coast at Gravelines. The Spanish fled before the wind, up the North Sea until they reached Scottish waters. They were forced to continue northwards and rounded



the top of Scotland before heading south. This map shows the places where ships were wrecked off the Scottish coast and the northwest coast of Ireland.<sup>vii</sup>



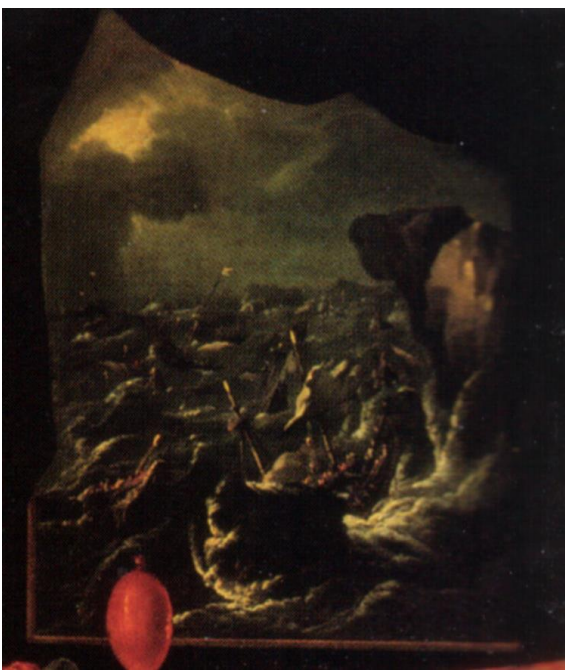
For anyone making an in-depth analysis of the wrecking scene in the Woburn painting, it becomes clear that the flags flying from the top of the masts of these ships are diagonal crosses. From the painting of the engagement of the Spanish fleet off Portland, it is apparent that the invading fleet is recognisable by a flag showing an upright yellow cross on a red ground. Why has the artist done this? Comparing these naval scenes to the Tyrwhitt Drake painting it is obvious the flags in this painting are completely different.

Whoever created those naval scenes had a thorough knowledge of ships, and the realistic rendition makes it clear that they are

by an accomplished marine artist. The immediate difference is the colour of the sea. At first glance, you may think it is the same story, but look closer. These ships are sailing towards the fireships, not away from them. The way the fleet is portrayed in the background is closer to the contemporary descriptions of the



engagement. The ships in the foreground are flying the red ensign from their sterns. The cross on the top of the imperial crown is visible, but in this context perhaps it can be read as a retrospective statement of God being on the side of the English. These are clearly English ships waiting to engage the Spanish as they flee the fireships.



The scene to the right of the queen also shows the Spanish ships being wrecked on a rocky shore driven by a Protestant wind, but this artist has clearly studied the effects of the weather and from this small scene I would suggest has also witnessed a shipwreck. But why the difference in this painting in the way this event is depicted to the other two versions?

The answer is that these scenes were painted over the originals at a later date and are clearly the work of an extremely competent marine artist. But who? Are there any candidates? When was this overpainting done? More to the point, why? Perhaps it was done in the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century if so, then there are possible candidates, or was it done after the Tyrwhitt Drake family acquired it?

In 1672, William van de Velde and his son, also called William, arrived in London. These two artists are known for their marine paintings and are recognised as major maritime artists of the Golden Age of Dutch Art. From the accounts of Charles II, we learn that each was paid an annual retainer of £100. Very specifically, William the Elder was paid for his ability to draw maritime battles, while his son, William the Younger, was paid for his ability to render them in colour.

The Armada invasion threat to both England and the Dutch was the equivalent to that of Hitler's in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so it is no wonder that this event has been portrayed by anonymous 16<sup>th</sup> century English artists and the Dutch artist Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom. Vroom is credited as being the founder of the Dutch marine school of art and is an early artist of the Dutch Golden Age. However, stylistically it is obvious that these scenes were painted later than the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, which discounts Vroom as a candidate.

Considering the importance of the van de Velde father and son's artistic contribution to the English maritime school of art, the Golden Age of Dutch together with the allegiance of the Dutch against the Spanish, is it possible that this over painting was done by them? William van de Velde the Younger's contribution to the English maritime school of art is considerable. He was known for his atmospheric portrayal of weather, in particular - storms. J M W Turner was inspired by his work - but that adds another name to the possible artists who repainted these two elements of this painting.

Turner's fascination with atmospheric conditions caused by storms and the way ships are tossed and wrecked by the sea are rendered with exquisite accuracy in his early works. Did the Tyrwhitt Drake family ask a young Turner (1775-1851) to repaint the English victory over the Spanish? They bought the painting the year Turner was born. Nelson defeated the French at Trafalgar on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1805. Is it possible the Tyrwhitt Drake family have records of commissioning Turner to repaint this scene to coincide with another great naval victory? Will we ever know? There are many other talented maritime artists of this period to consider.

Until this painting is secured for future generations it will not be subject to the scrutiny that could unravel many of the questions I have posed. This portrait is part of our national heritage. Please be part of saving it for future generations to enjoy. This is the link to the page for donations [Save the Armada Portrait](#) Remember, if you are a member of the Art Fund then the patrons of the Art Fund have pledged to match donations £ for £.

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<sup>i</sup> The Coram Rege rolls are a record of the proceedings of the Court of Common Pleas and are held at our National Archives

<sup>ii</sup> [www.historicalportraits.com](http://www.historicalportraits.com)

<sup>iii</sup> Cacafuego translates as firehitter, which describes her firepower.

<sup>iv</sup> This is the restored frieze above the paintings depicting the passion of Christ in Wolsey's Closet and was taken from this website.

<http://tmlighting.com/products/hampton-court-palace-cumberland-suite-wolsey-closet/>

<sup>v</sup> The Indenture for the Poor Knights of Windsor is in the English National Archives at Kew. Photo © MVT.

<sup>vi</sup> I would like to thank Phil Roberts, who has been a member of The Mary Rose Trust since its inception, for his help in the maritime aspects of this article. He is the author of *White Hall Palace in a Nutshell*. [get the book](#)

<sup>vii</sup> This map was sourced from the Wikipedia entry on the Spanish Armada, which says it is held in The History Department of the United States Military Academy at WestPoint.