

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Elizabeth Vernon by Anon



Title:	Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of Southampton (b. 1573)
Maker:	Anon. (British School)
Medium:	Oil on canvas
Date:	c. 1603
Dimensions:	h. 188 x w. 109 cm
Museum No:	PD.4-1984
Gallery:	3

The Sitter

Elizabeth Vernon, daughter of John Vernon of Hodnet in Shropshire, was first cousin to the Earl of Essex, whose influence gained for her the position of Maid of Honour to Elizabeth I. In 1598, she secretly married Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, of whom there is a portrait miniature in Gallery 32. He was a close friend of the Earl of Essex who in 1601 rebelled against the Queen. Wriothesley was imprisoned for his part in the Essex rebellion and was only reinstated to a position of favour when James I was crowned. The sumptuous costume and the fact that in this portrait Elizabeth Vernon wears the robe and coronet of a countess suggest that it was painted to celebrate James' coronation.

The Painting

This large painting, which was one of a group of four state portraits, speaks of position and status through every aspect of its content and style.

The objects that surround her accentuate the Countess' wealth, clearly shown by her clothes, jewels and robes. She stands on a richly-woven carpet, a common means of showing status in Tudor and Jacobean portraits; above her hang drapes of heavy silk and behind her is a throne-like chair.

The style of the painting echoes the stress on status so clearly made by the content. The size of the figure is most likely larger than life which in itself makes a striking impression. The viewpoint chosen by the painter is very low, and the viewer looks up at the Countess (this can be clearly seen by the treatment of the floor) which adds to her grandeur. She is placed centrally on the canvas and framed by the drapes hanging behind and, thus, our eye is fixed on her figure which takes up most of the available space.

The care given to various parts of the painting is also interesting: for example, the dress is painted with far more attention than the face; the use of tone on the clothing gives great depth and an illusion of shimmering silk; the face, in comparison, is rendered somewhat flat and mask-like. This may be because of the common practice of portrait painters working from costumed dummies, thereby devoting more time and attention to the painting of clothes, or it may be that the emphasis of this painting lies in the position and status of the sitter rather than her individuality.

The Costume

She wears a high Elizabethan state costume of heavy silk decorated with lace and pearls; the bodice is attached to a pointed stiffened stomacher (front panel) with a square neck line, completed behind by a fan shaped ruff (a style generally reserved for ceremonial occasions). The sleeves, full at the top and tapering to the cuff were known as trunk or farthingale sleeves. The skirt is shaped by a "French", or "wheel" farthingale, a structure made of wire or whalebone covered in silk or damask, which was more exclusive than the smaller Spanish style.

The Countess' face is as fashionable as her clothes. The pallor of her skin is most likely due to the use of ceruse, a cosmetic of white lead mixed with vinegar which became fashionable during the reign of Elizabeth, some say because of the Queen's severe attack of smallpox. Ceruse was worn on all areas of exposed flesh and pallor was sometimes emphasised by the addition of painted veins. Her forehead is high and her eyebrows thin, both attributes often achieved by use of razors and tweezers; her lips and cheeks are red, probably because she wears a mixture of cochineal, white of egg, alum and gum arabic used to achieve the desired contrast between lip, cheek and skin colouring. It is impossible to say if she is wearing a wig, but they were often worn by women who either had grey or thinning hair, as did the Queen after the same attack of pox that ruined her complexion.