Examining the Cobbe portrait of Shakespeare



The Cobbe Portrait, reproduced by agreement between The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and the copyright holders, unknown artist, c. 1610 (Cobbe Collection)

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We believe that this portrait of William Shakespeare is the only one to have been painted during his lifetime. Sadly we do not know the name of the artist but that is often the case for paintings at this time.

Look at how carefully the artist has painted Shakespeare's face and clothes. His skins looks clear and his eyes look bright and alive. The beautiful lace collar was very fashionable and expensive, and shows us that, at this time in his life, Shakespeare was successful and wealthy.

This portrait was painted on oak panels, using wood from a tree that was cut down when Shakespeare was a young man. The wood was left to 'season' (dry) so that it would be in good condition for painting. The paints were made from pigments, or coloured earths, mixed with linseed oil. Look at how bright and clear the colours are in this portrait, and how they shine and gleam in the light.

This is a portrait that many other artists have copied. This kind of copying was not seen as 'wrong' but rather as flattering the artist and acknowledging the importance of the sitter.