

Profiles of a New World – the Portrait Silhouette in North America

Emma Rutherford, a leading authority on silhouettes and portrait miniatures, explains how silhouettes quickly became a popular art form in America.

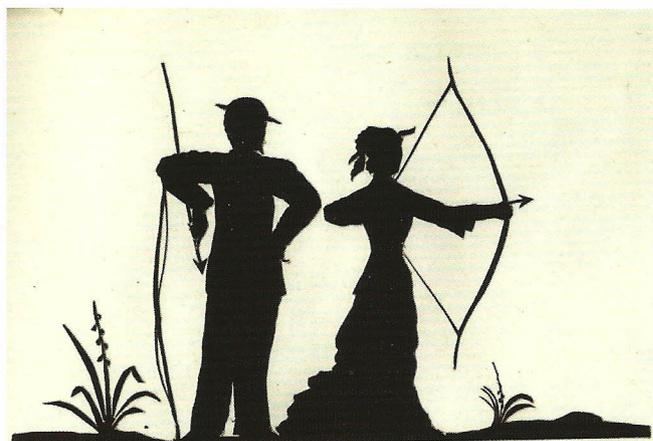
Like much else transported on the equally terrifying and enthralling passage to the New World, portrait silhouettes were treasured as a reminder of home and those left behind. Taken from an article in the *Illustrated London News* of 1850, this emotional description of a ship leaving the docks alludes to how important these “tokens” of home were:

the eyes of the emigrants begin to moisten with regret at the thought that they are looking for the last time at the old country — that country which, although, in all probability, associated principally with the remembrance of sorrow and suffering, of semi-starvation, and a constant battle for the merest crust necessary to support existence is, nevertheless, the country of their fathers, the country of their childhood, and consecrated to their hearts by many a token.¹

The need for a reliable, portable likeness was particularly

(above) *Silhouette from a Scrapbook of Profiles*, Emerin Price Semple, 1800s, American Museum in Britain, [1974.114]

(right) *Trade Label for the Lyceum Gallery*, 1800s, printed on paper, Private Collection



heightened when the sitter was thousands of miles away from home. The inexpensive yet accurate quality of silhouettes made them an important means of communication for newly naturalized Americans settling into their young republic. Cutting silhouettes was rooted in childhood and parlour games, allowing for a strong amateur output. It is clear from a handbill, found on the reverse of a silhouette produced by the Lyceum Gallery (operating from The Strand in London) that silhouettists recognised a commercial opportunity in those departing for a new life [right].

Silhouettes quickly became an established form of popular portraiture in America. From the 1780s, many amateur examples can be found, for drawing profiles was often suggested as a way to learn the skills to render a complete face. Basic techniques for budding draughtsmen and draughtswomen included tracing the silhouette, as recommended in manuals such as *The Artist's Assistant* (published in Philadelphia in 1794). Although the taking of a silhouette was a relatively fast procedure, amateurs surely found the task daunting and time-consuming. As early as 1769, a letter written by

Harriott Pinckney of South Carolina included the following complaint: “Thos. Wollaston has summoned me today to put the finishing touches to my shadow, which straightens me for time”. Interest in profile portraits increased in the late eighteenth century, with the publication of theories on physiognomy and phrenology, such as Johann Caspar Lavater’s (1741–1801) *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (1775–1778) and Thomas Dobson’s (1751–1823) *Encyclopaedia or Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Misc. Literature*, published in America in 1798, which included an important essay on physiognomy. This well-read book totally accepted the classification of human features as a viable and valuable science. In popular terms, this meant that silhouettes were not only valued as “aide memoirs” but were also used in the pseudo-scientific interpretation of the face. Professional silhouettists and artists, recently arrived from France (Charles Balthazar Julien de Saint Mémin 1770–1852), England (James Sharples 1751/2–1811), and Switzerland (David Boudon 1748–c.1816) began to provide fine examples of this novel art.

As the popularity of the silhouette grew, professional silhouettists were readily available in most major American cities or passing through the smaller towns on a fairly regular basis. During the nineteenth century, silhouettes quickly became part of American portraiture, appearing on the walls of anyone who could afford them. Because silhouettists were, on the whole, relentless self-promoters, it was hard to avoid the advertisements and broadsides selling the latest way to have one’s profile taken.

For art historians, American silhouettes — particularly those rare examples from the eighteenth century — are extremely important artefacts. As E. Nevill Jackson noted, “pictorial records are so comparatively rare in the States, that even machine-cut profiles, the humblest in technique, may open a page in [to the] social life of the past”. Often produced by amateurs, exciting new events, such as the arrival of the first railroads, were captured in profile.

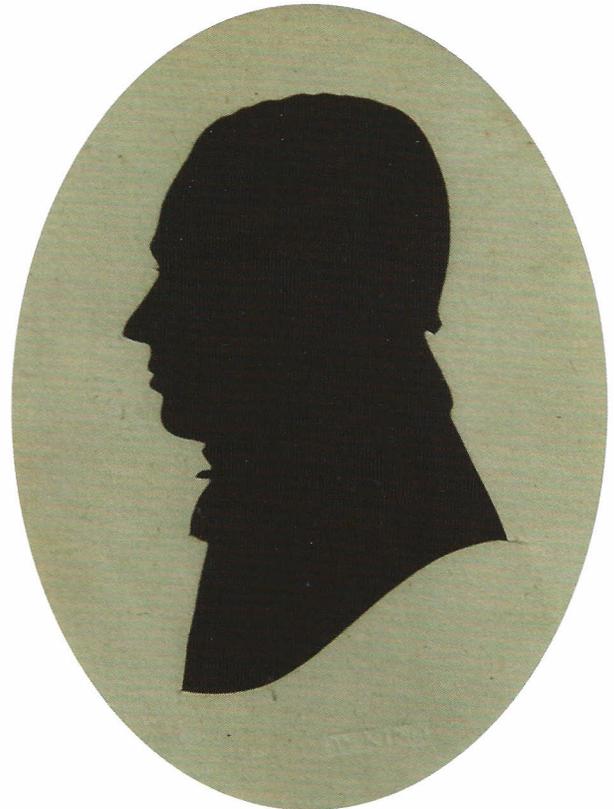
Wherever immigrants congregated, moreover, there was an increasing need for professional silhouettists. Although New York was an important centre for new arrivals, other cities and towns were also flourishing. A high percentage of the silhouettes taken were concentrated in New England, made by profilists such as William M. S. Doyle of the Columbian Museum in

Boston, or Salem’s William King.

Other, less well-populated areas relied on itinerant silhouettists, who typically advertised in local newspapers for the duration of their stay. Travel through America in the early nineteenth century was brutal, with coaches struggling over poor roads that in many places were simply ruts carved out by wagon wheels. In 1823 the first macadam road was constructed in Maryland, and its relatively smooth surface must have produced a wonderful sensation for coach travellers. In the South, slow-moving flatboats were available, and the first steamboat on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers reached New Orleans in 1812. Railways also became a viable option, but only later in the nineteenth century; the construction of the famed B&O railroad, stretching from Baltimore to Ohio, began in 1828.

Some itinerant artists had to drum up business by claiming to use new techniques — and there was always a demand for the new and the curious. William King of Salem (active 1785–c.1809) also showed his marketing skills when he advertised a new “delineating pencil” in an 1805 issue of the *New Hampshire Gazette*. He called this pencil “newly invented” and claimed that it could excel “any machine before invented for that purpose”. He seems to have been somewhat adept at false claims, for he also faked his own death; after his marriage in 1789, he is said to have abandoned his young family in





1792 on the pretext that he intended to commit suicide by drowning. In reality, he simply wanted to be a free man again, able to work without other responsibilities.

Many silhouettists travelled from Europe in the hope of making their fortune in America. During the nineteenth century, the child prodigy known as Master Hubbard² came from England in search of new clients. The French-born Auguste Edouart stayed for nearly ten years (1839-1848), during which time he cut more than 3,800 silhouettes all over the country.

Auguste Edouart (1788-1861) takes a special place among the immigrant silhouettists of America. Surprisingly, his work was popular even after photography sounded the death knell for other silhouettists. Edouart came to America with an excellent pedigree, having been a former court silhouettist to King Charles X³ of France (who called him his “Black Knight”) and to the Duke of Gloucester. Edouart popularised the term *silhouette* as opposed to *profile*, and was certainly an interesting character — serious, hard

(above left) William King, *Zilpha Wadsworth Longfellow, mother of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, hollow cut on card and backed with black silk

(above right) William King, *Stephen Longfellow, father of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, hollow cut on card and backed with black silk

(opposite) Moses Chapman (c.1783-1821), printed handbill showing spaces for including the location of the artist. All courtesy of Peggy Mcclard, www.peggymcclard.com.

working, skilful, and egocentric.

Edouart’s silhouettes were simple [p. 9], and despite his enormous output, he required no assistants and relied on simple black paper, which he cut freehand.⁴ He must have been excellent company, for he secured commissions from almost anyone who held a position of authority or celebrity. One sitter from Baltimore, Mr. George Buchanan Coale, wrote: “a little Frenchman named Edouart has the most accurate eye I have ever seen. I send you a full length which he snipped, cut in two minutes.” He also kept records and duplicates of everyone whose profile he cut, providing historians with a pictorial “Who’s Who” of America in the 1840s.

As well as cutting the profiles of so many prominent Americans, Edouart also secured a series of commissions in the Quaker community. One recently rediscovered duplicate album contains 782 Quaker profiles, and it has been suggested that Quakers found the plainness of silhouette portraits particularly compatible with their principles of unadorned dress, speech, and furnishings. The comparative religious freedom that Quakers found in America allowed large communities to flourish and, like other immigrants, they had a very real need for inexpensive portraiture. There were also some amateur silhouettists among the Quakers, where the practice was welcomed as a hobby.⁵

Although the silhouette was celebrated for its qualities of plainness and honesty, in the case of the Quakers, a larger number of silhouettists relied on showmanship and new invention for business. The business of cutting silhouettes was often a piece of theatre — entertainment was an excellent way to entice new customers. One sensational hit was the arrival of Martha Anne Honeywell (1787–after 1847). She was all the more remarkable as an artist because she was born without hands or forearms in Lempster, New Hampshire. Writing in 1931, and unfettered by the political correctness that would be considered more appropriate today, M. L. Blumenthal says that she “executed these unbelievable cut-outs with her toes, of which she had a scant supply, and her teeth, of which nothing derogatory is reported”.

Honeywell was advertised as cutting likenesses “with the mouth”, and an eyewitness account from 1809 confirms her talents. William Bentley watched as Honeywell threaded a needle and embroidered using her toes and mouth, made paper cut-outs by balancing a pair of scissors with her mouth and arm stump, and wrote a letter with her toes. Like many of her fellow itinerant

silhouettists, Honeywell travelled the country, advertising her performances in newspapers and broadsides. She worked in Salem, Charleston, Louisville, and Boston, among other cities, and even travelled to Europe.

It is often noted how many American silhouettes are “hollow-cut”, with the image cut out of the centre of paper [p. 11]. The “hollow” space was then backed with paper or black silk to show the resultant silhouette. This is largely due to the predominance of the machine-cut silhouette, which often worked to produce this type and was particularly popular in New England. These machines were cumbersome and not easy to transport, so they were chiefly housed in established studios set up in cities and towns.

One such machine was housed at Peale’s Museum in Philadelphia and was the basis for a quite remarkable story. Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827)⁶ recognized the commercial opportunity the silhouette afforded. He included the “experience” of the machine-cut silhouette for those visiting his celebrated museum in Philadelphia, charging eight cents for four copies. A consummate

CORRECT

Profile Likenesses,

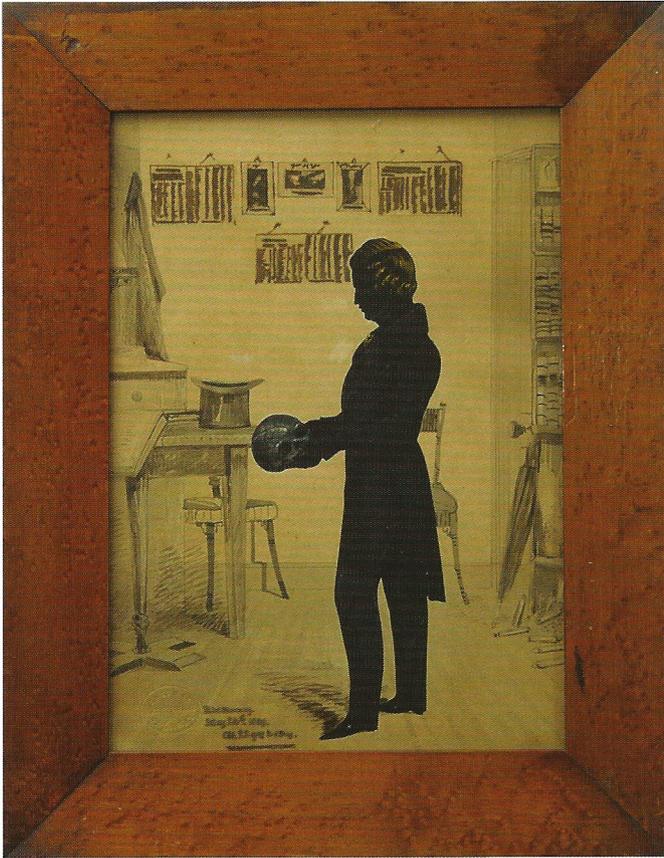
Taken at Mr. *from*

8 o'clock in the morning until 9 in the evening.

M. CHAPMAN respectfully informs the Ladies and Gentlemen of _____ that he takes correct Profiles, reduced to any size, two of one person for 25 cents, neatly cut on a beautiful paper. He also paints and shades them, if requested, for 75 cents; specimens of which may be seen at his room. Of those persons who are not satisfied with their Profiles, previous to leaving his room, no pay shall be required. He makes use of a machine univerversally allowed by the best judges to be more correct than any ever before invented.

☞ Those who wish to embrace this opportunity of having their Profiles taken, will please to make early application, as he will positively leave town on _____

N. B. *Frames* of different kinds, for the Profiles, may be had at the above place, from 50 cents to 2 dollars each.



(left) *Richard Blamey, aged 22, holding a phrenology skull, Hubbard Gallery 1839, cut out and painted on card with painted background, courtesy of Peggy Mcclard*

(below) *Advertisement for Peale's Museum, 1826, printed, courtesy of Peggy Mcclard*

(right) *Auguste Edouart, Portrait Silhouette of Horace L. Edgar Pratt, 12 August 1844, Saratoga Springs, New York, American Museum in Britain, [2009.4]*

Honeywell threaded a needle and embroidered using her toes and mouth, made paper cut-outs by balancing a pair of scissors with her mouth and arm stump, and wrote a letter with her toes.

PEALE'S MUSEUM—and Gallery of the Fine Arts,
Broadway, opposite the Park.

RHINOCEROS.

THE only specimen ever brought to this country: on its passage from India to England, it died and was then sold for 1600 dollars. It measures 10 feet from the nose to the tail and 9 feet in girth. In size the Rhinoceros is only exceeded by the Elephant, but in strength superior. Its nose is armed with a formidable weapon, peculiar to this creature, being a very hard and solid horn, with which it defends itself from the most ferocious of animals, it fears not the Lion, Tiger or Elephant. The body and limbs are covered with a skin so thick and hard that it turns the edge of a scimitar, and even resists the force of a musket ball. It is supposed to be the Unicorn of Holy writ, and possesses all the properties ascribed to that animal. This specimen is placed in the Museum only for a short time, and will go to the South after the 13th of October. During this month the Philosophical experiments commence at half past 8 o'clock every evening. Admittance at all times 25 cents, children half price.

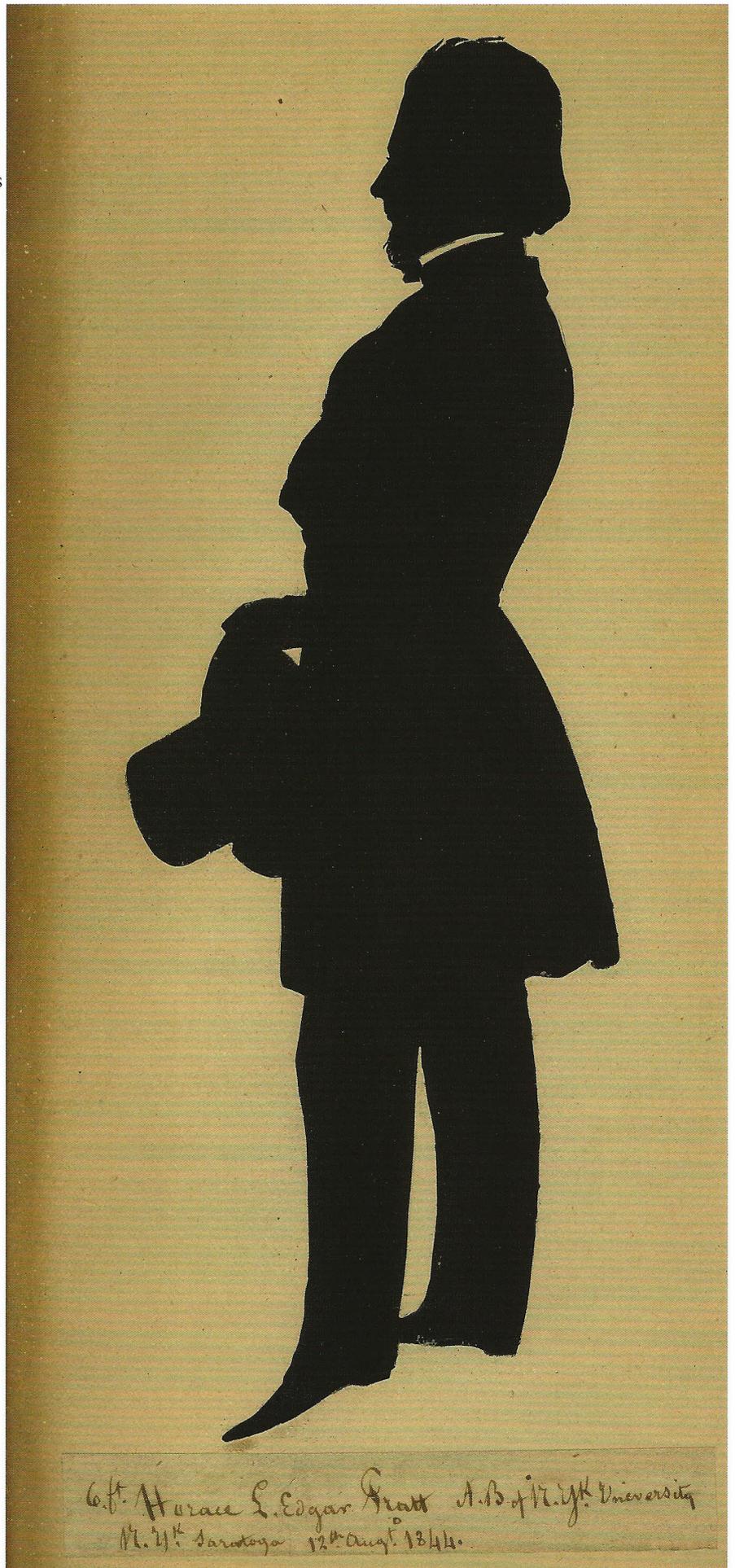
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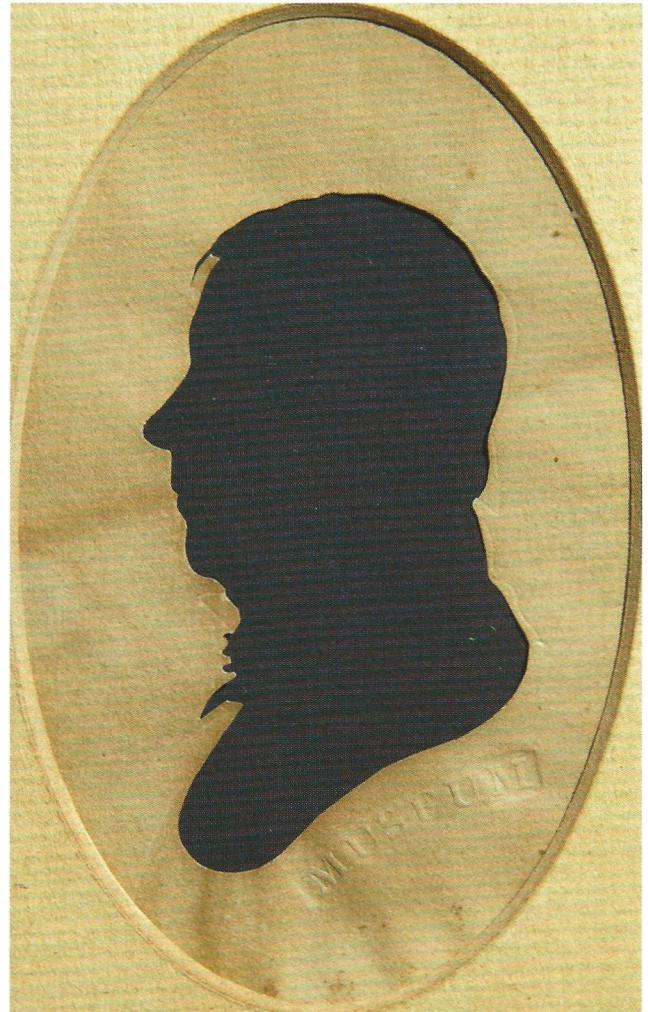
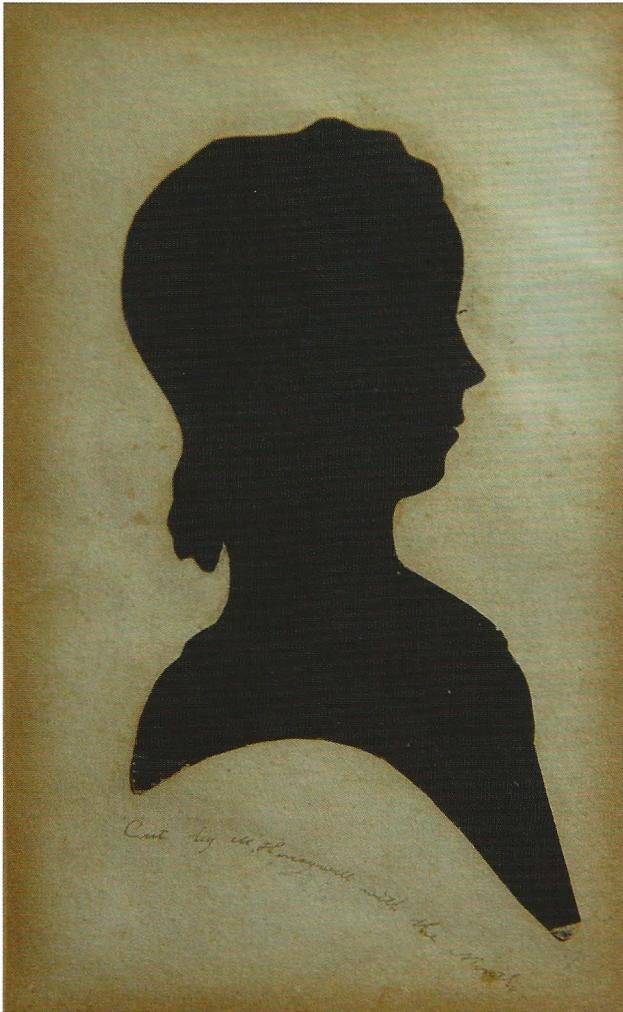
showman, he traded on the machine-cut silhouette as a wonder of the modern world combined with a take-home souvenir.

Peale's museum was an extension of his own personality, which was governed by deism and the Enlightenment. He must have been a driven man, and at the very least a workaholic — he patented steam baths and bridge designs — and a polygraph: he made clocks and watches, as well as the glasses and cases for his miniatures. During his lifetime, he was a soldier, legislator, and lecturer. Amid all this, he also had seventeen children (many bearing testimony to their father's passions, as they were christened after famous painters, naturalists, and collectors), and in 1784 he opened a museum at his house on the corner of Third and Lombard Streets in Philadelphia.

One of the museum's main attractions was the Profile Gallery. In 1802 John Isaac Hawkins had invented a simpler version of the physiognotrace. He gave the right to Peale to use it in his museum from 1803, and the device was an immediate and long lasting attraction. Over 8,500 silhouettes were cut during the first year of operation. Just as in Britain, where silhouette-making transcended class and sex, in America it also transcended race, allowing a freed black slave to work in the same capacity as his white competitors. Moses Williams (1777–c. 1825) operated the silhouette-cutting machine at Peale's Museum, and eventually earned enough money to buy his freedom and marry Peale's cook, a white woman named Maria.

Williams, the son of slaves, was born and raised within the Peale household. His parents, Scarborough and Lucy, were a mixed-race couple who probably came into the Peale home as





silhouettes was not only practical but also aesthetic. It could be argued that the format of the full-profile silhouette reflects the then-fashionable Neoclassical style, for they are particularly reminiscent of the heads depicted on ancient coins — and yet the dress worn by the sitter was almost always thoroughly modern. Silhouettes were part of the portraiture of this forward-looking new nation, taking an accurate image of men and women in their modern clothing, and thus they were quintessentially contemporary snapshots, with few pretensions to grandeur. As in Europe, it was the photograph that eventually triumphed over the silhouette. Although initially the two co-existed, the invention of paper photography during the late nineteenth century produced even quicker, cheaper, more accurate portraits to be duplicated and disseminated among families at home and abroad.

Notes

1 *The Illustrated London News*, Saturday, 6th July 1850: an account of the procedure of emigration from the port of Liverpool to the New World and the Colonies.

2 Master William James Hubard (?1809-1862) caused a sensation when he landed in New York in 1824. The art historian Desmond Coke described him as an infant prodigy, one of “those luckless

artists who win a reputation during life, only to lose it shortly after death”.

3 Charles X (1757-1836) reigned 1824-1830. He spent time in England and Scotland whilst in exile.

4 Black paper was only available commercially from the 1820s. Prior to that date, silhouettists had to paint their own paper.

5 William Henry Brown (1808-1882) was a rare professional Quaker silhouettist who succeeded in securing the commissions of many celebrities.

6 The writer Peggy Hickman dryly stated that “Charles Willson Peale was a well-known cutter who combined the métier of profilist with that of dentist, silversmith, saddler, and taxidermist”.

7 Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860), son of Charles Willson Peale, can barely disguise his jealousy at Williams’s success: “It is a curious fact that until the age of 27, Moses was entirely worthless: but on the invention of the Physiognotrace, he took a fancy to amuse himself in cutting out the rejected profiles made by the machine...This soon became so profitable, that my father insisted upon giving him his freedom one-year in advance. In a few years he amassed a fund sufficient to buy a two storey brick house, and actually married my father’s white cook, who during his bondage, would not permit him to eat at the same table as her”.

This article has been adapted from Emma

Rutherford’s latest publication, *Silhouette: The Art of Shadow*, with a foreword by Lulu Guinness, published by Rizzoli, New York, 2009.