Side *by Side*®

Faces in Black and White

BY GREGORY LeFEVER

THE RAGE IN THE EARLY 1800S, SHADOW PROFILES GREW FROM THEIR ROOTS IN ANTIQUITY TO LEAVE A LEGACY OF COLLECTIBLE MINOR ARTWORKS. TODAY PATIENT ARTISTS TAKE SCISSORS AND KNIVES IN HAND TO CONTINUE THIS CHARMING ART.

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

This remarkable pair of hollow-cut portraits is the work of one of New England's most proficient silhouette artists, Samuel Bradburn Banton. The subjects are Mr. and Mrs. John Whitten of Waldo County, Maine, c. 1820. Banton cut the silhouettes on watercolor-painted wove paper and added watercolor and ink embellishment.

A curious thing about silhouettes—a simple cut, drawn, or painted profile on a piece of paper or plaster—is that we can really see the people in them. We somehow know what they look like without actually seeing their facial features or apparel details. We can understand much about their lives just by noting whether their shapes were thick or thin, slumped or poised.

Silhouettes work in mysterious ways. Just as they fascinated Americans and Europeans alike in the pre-camera years of the 19th Century, they capture the attention of modern collectors and traditional artisans who still cut these charming images.

Viewing the silhouette as a thing of beauty is remarkable in itself considering the human shadow's dark journey through history. Primitive humans associated it with mystery, darkness, and evil. "A dead person's soul was compared to a shadow, and Hades was the land of shadows, the land of death," wrote noted Swiss art historian Victor I. Stoichita in his 1997 book, *A Short History of the Shadow.*

Ancient artists eventually

redeemed the shadow, or "shade," as they called the artistic expression for centuries. They discovered that drawing the shadow against a contrasting background could effectively capture human shape, stance, and even personality. Silhouettes appeared in Persian, Minoan, and Turkish art, and as Egyptian hieroglyphics in pharaohs' tombs. Profiles adorned Etruscan oil jars and Greek vases. Silhouettes standing against a white ground on mosaic floors in First-Century Rome created three-dimensional masterpieces. Greek and Roman painters are said to have been the first artists to invent mechanical devices for capturing the outline of a person's shadow cast by sunlight, lamplight, or candlelight.

Pliny the Elder, a Roman philosopher killed in the 79 A.D. eruption of Mount Vesuvius, immortalized the shadow as an effective tool for depicting humans in a tale attributed to his *Naturalis Historia*. Pliny described a scene in which the daughter of Corinthian sculptor Butades captured the likeness of her lover while he slept by drawing the outline of his profile when his shadow fell across an adjacent wall. Her drawing enabled her father to create the first true-to-life, sculpted likeness of a person. Pliny's tale might be pure fancy, but it clearly illustrates the human shadow's escape from its earlier dark connotations.

Although silhouettes might have originated in antiquity, they barely merited mention as a decorative art form until 1699, when a little-known woman named Elizabeth Pyburg—probably more accurately Rhijberg—used her scissors to snip black portrait shades of England's King William III and Queen Mary.

"After reading English books upon silhouettes, you feel that you should as soon forget our mother's name, or the date of the Battle of Hastings, as forget Mrs. Pyburg," Ethel Stanwood Bolton declared in her 1915 book, *Wax Portraits and Silhouettes*. "She began things; she is like Adam and Eve."

COURTESY, THE WINTERTHUR LIBRARY: PRINTED BOOK AND PERIODICAL COLLECTION

The arcane practice of physiognomy—linking personality traits to physical attributes—experienced a revival in the 1770s due to a Swiss minister named Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801), who believed a person's individual essence was visible in the bones of the skull, and that "shades" offered "the truest representation that can be given of man." In his 1772 *Essays on Physiognomy, for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, he described silhouettes, which he felt were directly related to a person's physiognomy. His "sure and convenient machine for drawing silhouettes" allowed an artist to draw the shadow of the sitter cast by a lit candle onto a screen. His apparatus resembled the physiognotrace, invented 20 years later. The character he read in this woman's profile was "Goodness without much Ingenuity; Clearness of Idea & a ready Conception, a mind very industrious, but, little governed by a lively Imagination, & not attached to a rigid punctuality."

OF RUINS AND SCRAPBOOKS

The historically elusive Mrs. Pyburg had tapped into something that was coalescing, and in the next few decades three dissimilar influences—ancient ruins, scrapbooks, and the science of physiognomy—converged to create an extraordinarily popular art form.

Renewed interest began in 1738 when archaeologists unearthed a trove of Roman-era pottery and artwork at the buried city of Herculaneum and ten years later at Pompeii. Twelve feet of Mount Vesuvius's volcanic ash had smothered the two cities—just as it had suffocated shadow-vindicator Pliny the Elder—but helped preserve their artifacts. The discoveries fanned interest in the Roman lifestyle and arts, and suddenly "shadow portraits" were back in style.

COURTESY OF PEGGY MCCLARD ANTIQUES

Everett Howard was one of the foremost silhouette artists who used a silhouette machine. His work is noted for artistic flourishes along the bust line.

About the same time, scrapbooking in England exploded in popularity. Called "commonplace books," these collections of letters, poems, recipes, and other miscellany had emerged among the literati in the 1400s with the availability of cheap writing paper. Their popularity expanded greatly in the late 1700s through the example of a royal princess and the newfound fascination with "shades."

Of scrapbooks, Bolton wrote, "Everybody had one and everybody pasted. Queen Charlotte (spouse of George III) and the Princess Elizabeth (their daughter) made scrapbooks, and the princess spent much time cutting silhouettes to go therein. She cut all kinds of things—portraits of people and of dogs, hunting scenes, and other pictures, parts of which were so fine that a sharpened needle was used in cutting. The Princess's example was, of course, followed by those of less degree, and many a lady cut silhouettes for her scrapbook or for a friend's."

Mary Caroline Crawford, in her 1915 *Social Life in Old New England*, had a somewhat different take. "Originating in France, and flourishing greatly in Germany at the period when Goethe and his friends were making literature and history at the Court of Weimar, the silhouette soon reached England and penetrated through royalty and the nobility to the middle and then to the lower classes," she wrote. "It is curious to think of George III, that ogre of England, sitting for a scissors portrait by his daughter, the Princess Elizabeth."

Finally, the new science of physiognomy came into play. Elucidated by Johann Caspar Lavater in his 1772 *Essays on Physiognomy, for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, it held that a person's true personality is revealed in the subtle physical characteristics of his appearance, and that the silhouette best revealed those characteristics.

COURTESY OF PEGGY MCCLARD ANTIQUES

Seriously disabled from birth, Martha Ann Honeywell cut her silhouettes holding scissors in her mouth while accomplishing the writing with her toes. Although she was promoted in a sideshow manner, she traveled the United States and Europe earning a living and achieving an admirable reputation. This portrait is of a young woman named Lucyanne Z. Greene.

ART AND APPARATUS

The craze for silhouettes continued to grow in Europe, where the art was variously called "shadow portraits," "black profiles," "shadowgraphs," black shades," "scissortypes," and "skiagram," a term still used in medical photography.

"Silhouette"—the form's most enduring label—has a peculiar origin, dating back to Etienne de Silhouette, who in 1759 became controller-general for King Louis XV of France and so savaged the royal budget that his name became synonymous with "cheap." In an astounding marketing ploy, the day's leading silhouette artists began calling their works "silhouettes" to differentiate them from the more expensive painted profiles.

The term "silhouette" most commonly applies to a drawn or black-painted shape on a piece of paper or plaster. A "hollow-cut" silhouette has the pictorial shape cut away from a piece of usually light-colored paper, which is backed with dark paper or fabric to create the dark silhouette image. A "cut-and-paste" silhouette is when the pictorial shape is cut of the dark paper, then pasted onto a piece of light paper. In both cases, the image appears dark on light.

"In addition to type and media, a third important facet of silhouette description is format," explained art historian Penley Knipe in her 2002 essay, "Paper Profiles: American Portrait Silhouettes." Silhouettes, like portrait sculpture, are usually either busts or full-figure. Hollow-cuts are always bust length, while cutouts are found in both formats, she noted. There are 'conversation piece' silhouettes, which show a group, such as a family, in a customary setting like a drawing room.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY OF PEGGY MCCLARD ANTIQUES

Regarded as a premier silhouette artist, Frenchman Augustin Edouart cut his remarkable images freehand with scissors, remaining a fierce critic of machine-drawn silhouettes. He snipped this especially extravagant silhouette in 1837.

Artists most commonly used scissors to create silhouettes, although little historical data exists to indicate any special type other than embroidery scissors. They also used knives and occasionally needles, sometimes all three in combination.

The success of silhouettes in America, however, owes much to simplistic mechanical devices that enabled an artist to create a profile accurately and inexpensively in a matter of minutes—essentials for running a silhouette business in which price, speed, and the ability to create duplicates were critical. The most important was the physiognotrace, a five-foot-tall tripod contraption resembling an easel that allowed the artist to trace the subject's physical profile onto a small sheet of paper. The pantograph, meanwhile, could copy, enlarge, or reduce an existing image onto another sheet of paper.

In the 1790s, a few artistic French immigrants first set up studios in America with a tracing device—actually an early version of the physiognotrace—invented in France by Gilles-Louis Chretien for creating silhouettes. But Englishman John Isaac Hawkins is regarded as the inventor of the true physiognotrace in 1802. He promoted his invention through his Philadelphia friend, the multi-talented artist and entrepreneur Charles Willson Peale.

The years 1810 to 1840 are regarded as the heyday of the silhouette in America. During those thirty years, a number of silhouette artists

PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY OF PEGGY MCCLARD ANTIQUES

American silhouette artist William Henry Brown often is compared with Edouart in cutting skill and composition, as in this portrait of Helen Chambers.

BUREAUCRAT'S NAME MADE ART HISTORY

Delicate black-and-white profiles owe their name "silhouette" to a budget-slashing French bureaucrat whose name would otherwise be lost to the annals of history. As an eponym—a person's name bestowed upon a place, discovery, or other item—it's one of the strangest in art history.

Etienne de Silhouette, born in 1709, gained some fame as the French translator of works by Alexander Pope, William Warburton, and other English writers. He also won the favor of Madame de Pompadour, mistress of King Louis XV. In 1759, she had Silhouette installed as the king's top budget man, France's controller-general.

Silhouette's most pressing task was to stop the government's budgetary bleeding and somehow raise funds to wage the Seven Years' War against England. (To get a grasp of the task before him, his budget forecast for 1760 had projected income of 286 million livres against expenses of 503 million livres.)

Silhouette went at the challenge with a vengeance. He increased taxes on the rich—never an idea popular with the ruling class—by placing a levy on extravagant furnishings, luxury goods, servants, and profits. He ordered gold and silver items to be melted down. Then he went after King Louis's own household riches, an even worse idea.

After just eight months in office he was booted out. Silhouette's unfortunate legacy was that anything cheap or miserly came to be known as à la Silhouette.

The rest of the story—some of which may be folklore since historical record is lacking—is that Silhouette retired to his chateau at Bry-sur-Marne and spent his time snipping shade profiles as a hobby, thus the name "silhouette."

Another explanation is that the leading profile artist of the day, Frenchman Augustin Edouart, began calling his creations "silhouettes" in 1829 to distinguish them from more expensive art—even though English painter Henry Fuseli was known to have talked about "silhouettes" in London as early as 1810. Others speculate that Edouart used the term to differentiate his art from machine-drawn profiles. Edouart did not like the previous, common label for his profession—"black-shade man."

Whatever the case, Edouart likely was the most influential factor in "black shades" becoming known as "silhouettes," and the fact that they were cheap helped the name to stick.

worked in cities while others crisscrossed the countryside producing an astounding number of silhouettes for clients in every economic class. Some "profile cutters" claimed to have produced thirty thousand or more silhouettes during their active years.

The major silhouette artists are impossible to categorize. Some were American, others foreign. Some were rich, others destitute. Many used the tracing devices disdained by their scissor-wielding counterparts. Both men and women—and some youths—count among the most skillful.

As for the artists' customers, prominent art historian J. Russell Harper wrote, "They coveted the smug satisfaction of seeing their own likenesses, together with those of their wives, children, mothers, and fathers, gazing down on the assembled family. Two ways were found by which they could imitate their more affluent neighbors: cheap black-and-white silhouettes, or more expensive profiles and miniatures, but which were still less expensive than large oil portraits.

"Most sitters really just wanted a reasonable likeness, identical to those in 'respectable' neighbors' houses, for the flattering of their ego and the tickling of their fancy," Harper continued. "Artistic quality was unimportant."

COURTESY OF PEGGY MCCLARD ANTIQUES

This charming folk art silhouette was cut by one of the many talented anonymous artists who typified a distinctively American silhouette style in the early 1800s. Known today by titles such as "the Puffy Sleeve Artist" and "the Red Book Artist," they often produced hollow-cut portraits with painted bodies.

A painted profile cost about four dollars, while a detailed miniature could command twenty dollars. A machine-drawn silhouette, however, usually cost twenty-five cents.

END OF AN ERA

It took nearly one hundred years for the silhouette to journey from the court of King William III to America's shores. But in January 1839, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre unveiled his daguerreotype photographic process in Paris, and in 1840 Samuel F. B. Morse introduced the process in America.

Within just two years, daguerreotypes were becoming common, with one framed in a morocco case costing five dollars—about the same as a painted miniature. With the introduction of Henry Fox Talbot's collotype in 1841, which evolved into modern chemical photography, the price of capturing images mechanically plummeted.

"And thus the golden days of wax portraits and silhouettes passed away," Bolton wrote. "For years, few made them, and only those who cared for heirlooms treasured them. Yet as we study them, their charm grows."

"During the early decades of the 20th Century, there was a surge in interest of early silhouettes, and many reproductions—both legitimate and made to fool—were made and sold," said Peggy McClard of Houston, Texas, one of the country's leading dealers in antique silhouettes.

"Now those silhouettes are easy to confuse with early pieces and require someone who can identify the difference between 18th-, 19th-, and 20th-Century paper. Because there's such a large difference in the value of 19th- and 20th-Century

Artist Pamela Dalton created this delightful procession of children titled "Garden Parade." Cuts in the profiles add movement to the figures. Her unusual white-on-black images feature aged paper and have a distinctly early American quality.

silhouettes, it's important to have knowledgeable guidance."

Today a handful of talented artists continue to wield scissors and knives in traditional ways to create charming renditions of silhouette portraits and scenes. Some of those artists also practice *scherenschnitte* (German for "scissor cuts")—an intricate form of papercutting in which the designs are often symmetrical.

PAMELA DALTON

Pamela Dalton sees papercutting as an opportunity to make the world a better place.

"I earnestly and consciously want to provide the world with something beautiful," she said in her Ghent, New York, studio. "It seems the world needs a sense of harmony, and I think papercutting—especially if it's symmetrical and if you're working with folds to create mirror images—produces a kind of balance in design that's very soothing to the soul."

Dalton based this papercutting on one of Sophia and Nathaniel Hawthorne in the 2004 book *Hawthorne Revisited* (published by the Lenox Library Association). Unlike many papercutters, she uses a knife instead of scissors.

An accomplished *scherenschnitte* artist who also creates considerable silhouette work, Dalton has achieved her goal with a number of highly original pieces. Her silhouettes capture intricate scenes and sometimes include inspirational words as an element of their composition.

"Ninety-nine percent of what I do is from my imagination," she said. "Occasionally I'll reproduce a historical piece or an image someone has requested, but most of my papercuttings are completely original."

She began papercutting in her twenties during a stint in Denmark and loving all things Danish, including the idea that Hans Christian Andersen was a skilled papercutter in addition to a writer. "I began experimenting with papercutting and came up with some very primitive pieces," she recalled. "I found that I enjoyed it, was able to make a little grocery money, and things went on from there."

Back in America in the late 1970s, she became familiar with the writings of renowned *scherenschnitte* revivalist Claudia Hopf and wrote her a letter "with ten million questions." She was stunned when Hopf telephoned her in response. "She was so kind and so generous and had such a wealth of experience," Dalton said. "She really helped me get started."

Unlike some of her silhouettist peers, Dalton eschews scissors. "I almost exclusively use an X-Acto™ knife and I buy my blades by the hundreds. I also use magnification goggles that make me look like a welder, but at least I can see."

While Dalton produces an array of skillful black-on-white silhouettes, her white-on-black pieces are especially distinctive. "They've always just felt more early American to me," she said. "I like the antique, 19th-Century look of working with the white on black. I stain the paper with coffee, giving it an extra texture and warmth, more of a variety of shades that keep the piece from being stark. But if I'm doing a portrait silhouette of someone's child, for example, I always do it in the more traditional black on an off-white background."

Dalton sells her work in retail stores, in galleries, at selected regional craft shows in the Northeast, and through her web site. Prices range from $30 to $3,500.

MARIE-HELENE GRABMAN

The lifelong journey of this silhouette and *scherenschnitte* artist has gone literally from her grandmother's knee to winning some of the most prestigious awards in the world of papercutting.

"My maternal grandmother was German and a papercutter," Grabman recalled. "As a child she would tell me nursery rhymes and folk tales, cutting paper figures to illustrate the stories."

Grabman entertained her own four children in much the same manner, steadily gaining proficiency

"My Spring Song," by Marie-Helene Grabman, is a double silhouette cut from moss green and black papers to add depth and dimension to the scene.

with her scissors—including eye surgical scissors she buys in Switzerland—over the years. Then, in a twist of fate common to many of today's traditional artists, "My husband lost his job during an economic downturn in 1981 and I began to exhibit my work," she said. "Through study and practice, my work has improved."

Today she frequently wins best-of-show distinctions, and recently the East-West Association of Artists in New York awarded her the designation of "International Distinguished Master Papercutter." She also is on the executive board of the Guild of American Papercutters and has had exhibitions in the United States, China, and Europe, including at the Swiss National Museum. A long-time member of the Directory of Traditional American Crafts, she was among the first artisans to receive the Early American Life Heritage Artist Award.

Technically, Grabman, who lives in Alexandria, Virginia, creates *scherenschnitte* in the European style—an intricate technique typified by lace-like borders and multiple scenes—cut from a single sheet of paper and, she admits, "done by few other papercutters." As well, she produces a number of beautiful papercuttings in the traditional silhouette style.

"All of my work is of my original design," she explained, to distinguish herself from some papercutters who rely on patterns. "And although I rough-in some lines, all my details are cut freehand."

Grabman's style of art dates from 16th-Century Switzerland and Germany, but she makes some American departures in both theme and the finer points of technique. The result is a unique three-dimensional style with depth impossible to confuse with prints.

She sells her work from her web site and at a dozen fine craft and traditional craft shows and festivals each year. "I gladly accept commissions as time permits," she said. "My work is mainly sold retail but I also do limited wholesale." Prices range from $20 to $5,400.

ELLEN ROBERTSON

Silhouettes are simply another chapter in the long line of folk art Ellen Robertson has been producing for more than two decades. "I've always loved antiques and folk art," she said. "Going back to high school, I did needlework, oh, and I've done papier-mâché, folk art paintings, *fraktur*, and silhouettes—I just love it all."

In this charming winter scene, Grabman combines profiles of children and animals in the foreground with intricately cut trees that move off the black background.

The man's silhouette by Ellen Robertson is an adaptation of antique versions. The profile is hollow cut with watercolor accents on silk backing. The handmade frame has a gold-leaf design and antique glass. Robertson's frequent use of watercolor details is reminiscent of several leading 19th-Century silhouette artists.

Her folk art pursuits took on the trappings of a more active business in 1991 at a wholesale crafts show where she introduced a line of hand-painted picture frames that sold well. "Then, about five years ago, I began cutting silhouettes," she said. "I'd always liked them, and then I saw this particular one. I bought it and I studied it and I thought, 'You know, I really ought to make some of those.' So I made some, took them to a show and sold them to some museum shops and that encouraged me to keep going. It was that simple."

Robertson, of Charlotte, North Carolina, specializes in hollow-cut silhouettes adorned with elements of attire and occasional embellishments along the hairlines. Her inspiration comes from vintage silhouettes, magazines, auction catalogs, and the like. "I select the ones that I like," she said. "I might take a head and put a different body on it, or I might add something entirely of my own to it.

"I use aged paper, cuticle scissors to cut, and a good magnifying glass to see what I'm doing," she said. She draws the profile and then cuts it out in the hollow-cut style. "Then I turn it over and add the watercolor accents and back them with either black paper or silk."

She demands that the entire silhouette closely resemble a period piece. Her wood frames are handmade by an artisan friend in early styles, sometimes with wooden pegs.

Similar to antique silhouettes, this pair by Robertson is hollow cut from antique paper with watercolor accents, mounted on silk. The matt is an adaptation from a c. 1830 painting.

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"Many Windsors," by Wendy Schultz Wubbels, has black chair cutouts mounted on antique paper in an old frame. Wubbels is known for her creative treatments of classic objects presented in a non-traditional manner.

She uses aged paper and mounts the silhouettes with antique glass.

"I want them to look as original, as authentic as I can make them," she added.

Robertson has been in the Directory of Traditional American Crafts for the past two years. Her work can be found in shops at Colonial Williamsburg and the Museum of American Folk Art in New York and in catalogs such as Circa Home Living. She welcomes special orders. Her prices begin at about $80.

WENDY SCHULTZ WUBBELS

Some aspects of silhouette work that certain artists try to avoid are the very things that most attract Wendy Schultz Wubbels. She loves the starkness of the black-on-white images and she avoids stylized shapes for her subject matter.

"While a lot of us started out doing traditional *scherenschnitte* designs—the intricate hearts, the tulips and birds and flowers—at some point I realized I really loved doing realistic images rather than more stylized images," she recalled. "The result is that I'm cutting out an actual Windsor chair or I'm doing real butterflies instead of a stylized or pretty, artistic one—I'd rather do a butterfly that looks like one that's been mounted."

Likewise, she cuts realistic shapes for her people, insects, wildflowers, furniture, dogs, cattle, sheep, and pigs. This way, Wubbels creates powerful images in the original silhouette tradition of creating highly recognizable figures

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from mere shadows.

A native of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Wubbels began papercutting around age fifteen when her mother handed her a book by renowned *scherenschnitte* revivalist Claudia Hopf. She became highly adept at papercutting and eventually was intrigued with the silhouette tradition as well.

"Today, maybe 80 percent of what I do is silhouette work," she said from her home in Williamsburg, Virginia. "For me, personally, I love the starkness of the black image against the solid background. So it's really been my personal preference that's led me to do more of the silhouette work."

A prolific artist, Wubbels uses straight-blade surgical scissors and German silhouette paper. "I work on the design until I get it where I want it, then I transfer it to the paper, so I'm cutting lines that I've drawn, not freehand," she said. "The only change I've made in my tools over time is that I now work with a lighted magnifier. I've always had really good eyesight, but the magnifier has made a huge difference."

Yet another aspect of the artistic sensibility Wubbels brings to her silhouettes is her compositional preferences: "I like to take the classic images—and silhouettes are such classic images that they can work in contemporary as well as traditional homes—and I'll often present them in a way that's non-traditional. I like to do long lines of men and long lines of ladies, or even long lines of chairs, taking the classic elements and doing my own twist on them. The results are antique images in antique frames, and yet what I'm doing with them is not traditional. People have loved those things."

Wubbels does several crafts shows, sells to shops, has work in the Shaker Workshops catalog, and displays her work on her web site. Her silhouettes come in either hand-painted or antique frames. Prices range from $18 to $600. *

Oregon writer Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

This silhouette scene by Wendy Schultz Wubbels is based on antique examples with setting details penciled in to add depth. Wubbels is an expert of the silhouette style depicting scenes, which also gained popularity in the early 1800s.

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