SHADES OF BLACK AND WHITE

American Portrait Silhouettes

Penley Knipe

Silhouetted portraits played a brief but important role in popular American portraiture at the turn of the nineteenth century. Mirroring the history of these innumerable, diminutive portraits is the diversity of materials employed to make them. Silhouettes were made freehand and with tracing devices, by amateurs and professional artists alike, using everything from papers produced for artists to fragments of material from the scrap basket. This variety underscores the fact that silhouette making was a democratic art pursued by all manner of people.[1]

The use of the term "silhouette" is widespread now, but this was not historically the case. Early common designations included "shade" and "profile." Less common terms were "miniature cutting," "black profile," "scissortype," "shadow portrait," "black shade," and "likeness." Queen Victoria called her album "a collection of shades" in 1834.[2] The cutters themselves were sometimes called "profilists." Auguste Amant Constant Fidèle Edouart (1789–1861), the most well known of all silhouettists, called himself "black shade man" (see cat. 12 for self-portrait). He may have done so ironically, recalling the contempt some held for his trade before having seen the superior quality of his cuttings.[3] The *Black Out* exhibition includes a charming letter from a Mrs. Child to Edouart in which she thanks him for the beautiful "shadow," another term for a silhouette, and declares it to be "almost alive and breathing," a testament to Edouart's skill (cat. 16).[4]

The term "silhouette" is derived from the surname of a very unpopular eighteenth-century finance minister to King Louis XV. Étienne de Silhouette (1709–67) was in office for less than a year due to his conservative monetary policies. Contemporary products that were cheap or deemed miserly were quickly labeled à la silhouette.[5] Some suggest that Silhouette also snipped profiles as a hobby, but whether he was a profilist is unclear. Edouart popularized the term "silhouette" around the time he traveled to England from France in 1829. He sought to distinguish himself as an artist rather than someone who made "shades" with tracing machines or crudely by hand.

The earliest known silhouette—a double portrait of monarchs William and Mary—was probably made by Elisabeth Rhijberg in the late seventeenth century.[6] During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many well-known English artists painted silhouettes on ivory, glass, and plaster in the tradition of portrait miniatures, including Isabella Robinson Beetham (ca. 1750–ca. 1825), John Field (1771–1841), John Miers (ca. 1758–1821), and Charles Rosenberg (1745–1844). These painted portraits were costly and precious.

Some well-known amateurs, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Hans Christian Andersen, and Princess Elizabeth, daughter of King George III, all cut profiles from paper, a decidedly less lofty form than their painted cousins. Artists took up the paper art as well. Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810) of Germany made portrait bust silhouettes and botanical cutouts as well as landscapes and scenes. French artist Jean Huber (1721–86) cut portraits and intricate sceneries from paper and parchment. As mentioned above, Edouart was the best-known silhouettist. He was French but worked in England and then in the United States. Other artists in this country

1.
Illustration in *Introduction to the Art of Cutting Groups of Figures, Flowers, Birds, Etc. in Black Paper* by Barbara Anne Townshend. London: Printed for Edward Orme (1815–16) Courtesy of The Winterthur Library; Printed Book and Periodical Collection

included William Henry Brown (ca. 1808–83), William Doyle (1769–1828), Moses Williams (1777–ca. 1825), and Charles Willson Peale's sons Raphaelle and Rembrandt (1774–1825, 1778–1860). William James Hubard (1807–62) was an English child prodigy who cut silhouettes as a teen "without the least aid from Drawing, Machine, or any kind of outline."[7] Importantly, there were scores of ordinary people who cut or painted silhouettes of their friends and families in the drawing rooms. Authors, princesses, scholars, dilettantes, and trained and self-taught artists, as well as members of the general population, were all creating silhouettes, and this diversity manifests in the variety of materials and techniques that were used and in the range of skills we see exhibited.

Silhouettes come in a number of formats. The cutout full figure, either cut from black paper or painted in black ink, is the most familiar. Many of these are mounted onto lithographed scenes or onto blank cards, the figures secured to the earth with a wash to indicate a shadow. The National Portrait Gallery silhouette of Josephine Clifton, mounted to a lithograph, is a quintessential example of this type (see cat. 26).[8]

Cut from the same type of black paper as the full-figure silhouettes, the bust format is also common. The exhibition features an album of small busts by William Bache (1771–1845; see cat. 6), which appears to be a record book, based on the tight arrangement and the numbering system cataloguing each cutting.[9]

The silhouette type where a bust is cut away from a light-colored piece of paper and the outside or negative space is backed with black paper or fabric is termed a "hollow-cut silhouette." The exhibition features a double portrait example of this type, hollow-cuts of Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant, which has scrolling hair work around the perimeter, secured to the mount (see cat. 7).[10]

The final type is the "conversation piece." These silhouettes show families or friends in a domestic setting, like a drawing room with all of the accoutrements of daily life, such as eyeglasses and books. For instance, in the *Magic Lantern* (see cat. 41), Edouart uses the floor pattern and the architecture of the room to create space in this unusually lively scene.[11] In contrast, in the portrait of the Robeson-Lea family (see cat. 36), the figures are again in a room, but they appear to have been simply pasted down side by side. One historian described this effect as being visually similar to a funeral procession.[12] These settings are used to make the scenes more realistic and often stand in direct contrast to the stiff, one-dimensional nature of silhouetted figures.[13]

The aesthetic of the form of the silhouette arose from a variety of sources. There are numerous hypotheses about historical precedents. Pliny related the origin of painting as having come from a tale of a Corinthian maid tracing her lover's shadow on a wall to preserve his image (see fig. 1 [in Naeem essay]). Early profile images found in Egyptian wall paintings and on Greek vases are often cited as sources. The eighteenth century saw a revived interest in this simplified form of portraiture. Antique sensibilities were highly favored at this time, in part because of the discoveries of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1748. Coins and antique medals

may also have provided additional source material. One can see the taste for all things antique in Wedgewood porcelain, in empire-style dress, and in the painting of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867). This aesthetic connection to silhouettes is made clear in an 1815–16 silhouette-cutting instruction book from London by Barbara Anne Townshend. The samples for copying in *Introduction to the Art of Cutting Groups of Figures, Flowers, Birds, &c. in Black Paper* obviously derive their style from ancient sources (fig. 1).

Silhouettes were a very popular form of portraiture in the United States by the 1780s. This type of likeness was much less expensive than the portrait miniature. Shades were often snipped for a few pennies. It was indeed popular; Hubard advised his clients who wanted full-length figures to "call in the Morning; for, as it has become a fashionable Evening Promenade, The applicants for Likenesses are so numerous that only the bust can be taken."[14] Another contributing factor was speed. Just one brief sitting was required. This brevity was featured in artists' advertisements. For example, Sam Weller claimed that with his "profeel machine" he could finish a portrait, frame it, and add a hanging hook in two minutes and fifteen seconds.[15] Even John Miers, the English artist who painted delicate silhouettes on ivory or plaster, required just a three-minute sitting, according to his label.[16]

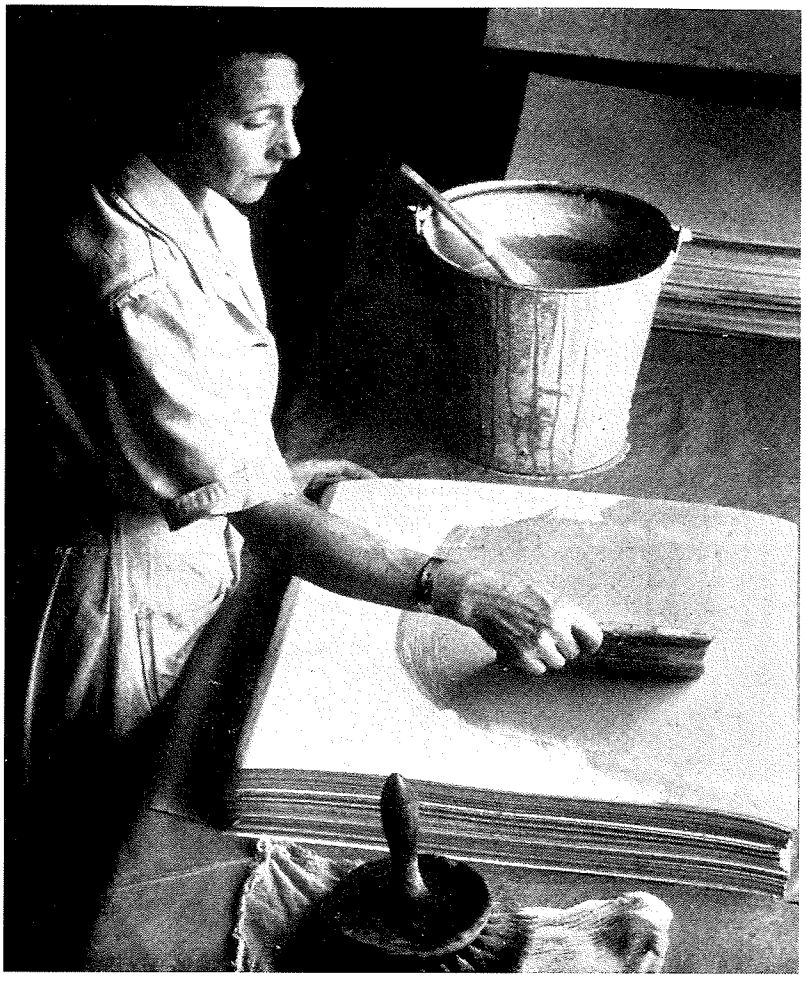
Another major selling point for the silhouette was that the artist often came to the sitter. Silhouettists in America traveled to summer resort areas, such as Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Newport, Rhode Island. Many itinerant silhouettists practiced other trades; some were tinkers, peddlers, or sign painters. In 1805, William King (1750–ca.1850) advertised as a profilist and a provider of electric shock treatment, a popular treatment at the time.[17]

In fact, in the early 1800s, a large number of itinerant and stationary silhouette artists were working throughout the eastern United States. Edouart arrived in 1839, an auspicious date for the development of another important form of portraiture, the photograph. Though Edouart's shades were popular, the advent of photography signaled the beginning of the end of silhouettes. One can see the moment of overlap of the two competing forms of portraiture here in the silhouettes of prominent Americans that Edouart cut, such as that of John Quincy Adams, done in 1841 (cat. 19).[18]

Edouart preferred a full-figure silhouette rather than the bust form. He generally incorporated personal details, such as the sheet music, complete with clefs and notes, held by Euphrasie Borghese (cat. 18).[19] Edouart kept duplicate albums and, like most artists, he folded the black-coated paper in half, black side in, so when he cut, two silhouettes were made. This action also protected the delicate black surface, which was prone to marring. Many sources state that Edouart simply observed and snipped. The backs of his silhouettes reveal that, in fact, he first drew with a pencil, at least sometimes. Edouart had a very particular style. His sitters' feet often dangle, he frequently inserted white collars, and his cutting was the most refined of any of the artists. The silhouette of Lady Whistler Haden, with the intricate cutting of her hands holding a magnifying glass, is an excellent example of Edouart's virtuosity (cat. 23).[20]

The materials and techniques used to make silhouettes were extremely varied. It may seem that it was just a matter of taking up a pair of embroidery scissors and a scrap of paper. However, when examined in depth, the materials reveal a lot about their makers and the craft. Typically, the paper used to make cutout silhouettes is thin and coated with a matte black substance on the other side. Some coatings are clearly hand-applied by the cutter. Bache may have colored his own papers or had it done by the gilder with whom he shared studio space.[21] However, many of the papers have a uniform appearance suggestive of commercial preparation.[22] Industrial coating of papers could indicate the market was large enough to support small-scale commercial production.

Documentary evidence for commercially prepared papers has proved elusive. Many American and English stationers' and artists' trade catalogues were consulted. Decorative and lightly tinted papers were found, but the black papers were not. Watermark evidence from Edouart reveals that he often used Whatman paper, a ubiquitous handmade paper from England favored by many artists.[23] Inquiries to the papermaker did not yield concrete results, but the general response was that the papers were not coated at the mill. Peter Bower, renowned paper



2.
Dorothy Hand-Coating Paper
1940s
Courtesy of the Bower Collection

historian, was certain that the papers were coated after manufacture, by stationers or colormen spinning large round brushes post-application to smooth the coating (fig. 2; see round brush in front).[24] Despite the lack of published evidence in trade catalogues, the physical similarities from paper to paper and between artists, along with Bower's support, strongly suggests that silhouette papers were available commercially, though the market was likely limited.

The papers used to make hollow-cuts were most often off-white or cream-colored and wove in structure, though laid paper was also used. Laid paper was made on a screen with prominent wires and wooden ribs, which created a slightly ribbed paper surface. A smoother "woven" papermaking screen was used for handmade wove paper, and the result was a more even surface. This paper, invented around 1750, was common by 1790. While it may seem surprising that hollow-cuts were sometimes made from laid papers when wove papers would have been less


Columbia
Betsy Island.
1791

visually distracting, the use of both demonstrates that people used what they had on hand. It also suggests that many cutters did not focus on this level of detail.

Some established artists, like the Peales and Edouart, used particular papers. Watermarks are generally very fragmentary because of the size of the profiles. However, it is known from watermark evidence that the Peale family from Philadelphia used wove paper from the Thomas Amies mill on the Schuylkill River tributary.[25] Examination of nearly ninety hollow-cuts by William Chamberlin (1790–1860) at the American Antiquarian Society revealed the use of different papers. Although all were cream and wove, they were from various mills and of varied texture and thickness, and not all were machine-made. As mentioned above, Edouart used Whatman papers.

One unusual hollow-cut, of the Reverend Jonas Clarke, illustrates essential issues about materials and making. This hollow-cut is in the 1734 Hancock-Clarke House in Lexington, Massachusetts (see fig. 3). The paper measures 14 by 19 inches, with the profile taking up half of that space. Most heads are much smaller, and they usually include some of the bust. This one looks as if an amateur drew it from life, likely using a candle to cast a life-size shadow. The paper of the Clarke hollow-cut had a previous life. On the verso, in 1797, a girl named Eliza Eaton penned, in a fancy manner, the war song *Columbia* (by Timothy Dwight, ca. 1778) (fig. 4).[26] The fancywork was likely a presentation piece for school, based on the handwriting, flourishes, the large size of the paper, and the words "Derby School" after Eaton's name and the date.[27] Further examination gleans additional useful information about this large hollow-cut. A detail at the lip reveals that the cutting was rather unpracticed, an amateur at work. There are pencil lines around the silhouette, including a false start, indicating that the profile was drawn first and then cut, a common practice, but one that professional silhouettists either skipped or took care to hide on the back. The silhouette of Reverend Clarke is a perfect example of a homemade silhouette. It is amateurishly cut from recycled materials at hand. Such silhouettes make excellent counterpoints to the refined work of Edouart, for example, and illustrate the range of skills, materials, and formats found in silhouettes.

Backings for hollow-cuts were often matte black paper or black material, but there is some variation. Some black-paper backings were shiny, and occasionally blue paper or plaid material backed a hollow-cut. It is not uncommon to find unbacked hollow-cuts because often the paper and the backing were never attached, causing the backing to be lost—sometimes the hollow-cut was never backed. The visual effect of hollow-cuts with no backing is lost.

Many silhouettes were enhanced with ink or chalk additions to provide details. From the beginning, ink eyelashes and hair were often added to the cream paper of a hollow-cut. William Chamberlin's hollow-cuts usually feature a distinctive shirt collar. Alternatively, especially after the advent of photography, cutout silhouettes were frequently decorated with chalk or graphite pencil or gold color, the latter called "bronzing."[28] This was done by painting with either shell gold

3.
Silhouette of Reverend Jonas Clarke Cut by His Son Henry (recto)
ca. 1797
Cut paper
35.6 × 48.3 cm (14 × 19 in.)
Courtesy of Lexington Historical Society

4.
Silhouette of Reverend Jonas Clarke Cut by His Son Henry (verso)

5.
Catharine Williams and William Mead
Auguste Edouart (detail of Williams showing chalk enhancements)
1843
(see cat. 30)

(finely ground gold) or bronze powder, a metal flake pigment from various copper alloys. Though Edouart disparaged "touching" up, he often added chalk or graphite. Again, these details are more common after 1839 because of the advent of photography. See, for example, the extensive chalk enhancements on the silhouettes of Catharine Williams and William Mead from 1843 (fig. 5; cat. 30).[29]

In terms of scissors for the actual cutting, embroidery scissors are mentioned repeatedly, and they were the choice of Edouart.[30] An early nineteenth-century source confirms that scissors should have long shanks and short, sharp points.[31] The self-portrait of cutter W. Fischbach is an excellent rendering of the type of scissors used (fig. 6). Later sources mention the importance of scissors that are slightly loose at the hinge to give the cutter flexibility and dexterity to change direction with ease.[32] Fiskars, a Finnish company that has been making scissors since the early 1830s, reported making special order silhouette scissors from carbon steel on occasion and paper-cutting scissors more regularly.[33] Silhouette scissors are still readily available today. Generally, amateur and professional silhouettists alike most often used needlework scissors, as these tended to be small and sharp for ease of manipulation and for short, well-controlled cuts. A contemporary cutter from England, Charles Burns (born 1961), uses surgical scissors that are designed as recommended above.

That knives were used to do some cutting is noted in the literature.[34] Desmond Coke, a silhouette historian, found examples where the cutter wrote "Cut with a Knife" on the work.[35] Indeed, examination of some of the finest cut details in silhouettes indicates that a tool other than scissors must have been used, simply based on the scale of some areas within which it would have been very difficult to manipulate even a pair of very small scissors.

A particularly intriguing aspect of silhouettes is when the profiles are captured with the aid of a mechanical device. The original apparatus, a *physionotrace*, developed in France by Gilles-Louis Chrétien in 1786, was brought to this country in the 1790s by a group of French émigrés. Many of the early tracers were used for capturing a profile for small engravings or to lay down the general countenance prior to painting a miniature or drawing a small portrait in profile.

One example of a tracing device used in the United States was the physiognotrace developed by John Isaac Hawkins. Hoping to promote his invention, Hawkins gave the device to Charles Willson Peale for use in the Peale Museum.[36] Peale had opened a museum in Philadelphia in 1785, from which he wanted to fashion a series of national museums for democratic education in arts and sciences. Two more museums in New York and Baltimore eventually opened. The Philadelphia museum was extremely popular and well attended. By 1802, in addition to exhibiting portraits of distinguished Americans, minerals, fossils, a mastodon skeleton, wax figures of Indians, war equipment, and anatomical deformities, Hawkins's physiognotrace was featured at one end of the Long Gallery.

Guests could make their own hollow-cuts or get assistance from Moses Williams, who ran the physiognotrace. Williams was an African American raised

6.
Silhouette Self-Portrait of W. Fischbach
W. Fischbach
1875–99
Cut paper on paper
8.5 × 7 cm (3⅜ × 2¾ in.)
RKD—Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague

with the Peale family after the manumission of his parents. One broadside from 1818 read, "The Profile Cutter attends every day and evening—Frames furnished at the door."[37] Most people wanted Williams to make the silhouette for them, for which he charged eight cents. Williams cut from 1802 until approximately 1813, and there were at least two others who worked the physiognotrace after him, Elizabeth Hampton and Elizabeth Meigs.[38] This exhibition features a hollow-cut of Moses Williams that was made using a physiognotrace, though whether it is a self-portrait or traced by another is debated (see cat. 3).[39] A portable physiognotrace used by Raphaelle Peale is also included in the exhibition (see cat. 4). Raphaelle

used this just after the turn of the century to cut silhouettes when he traveled, though he was primarily painting miniatures.[40]

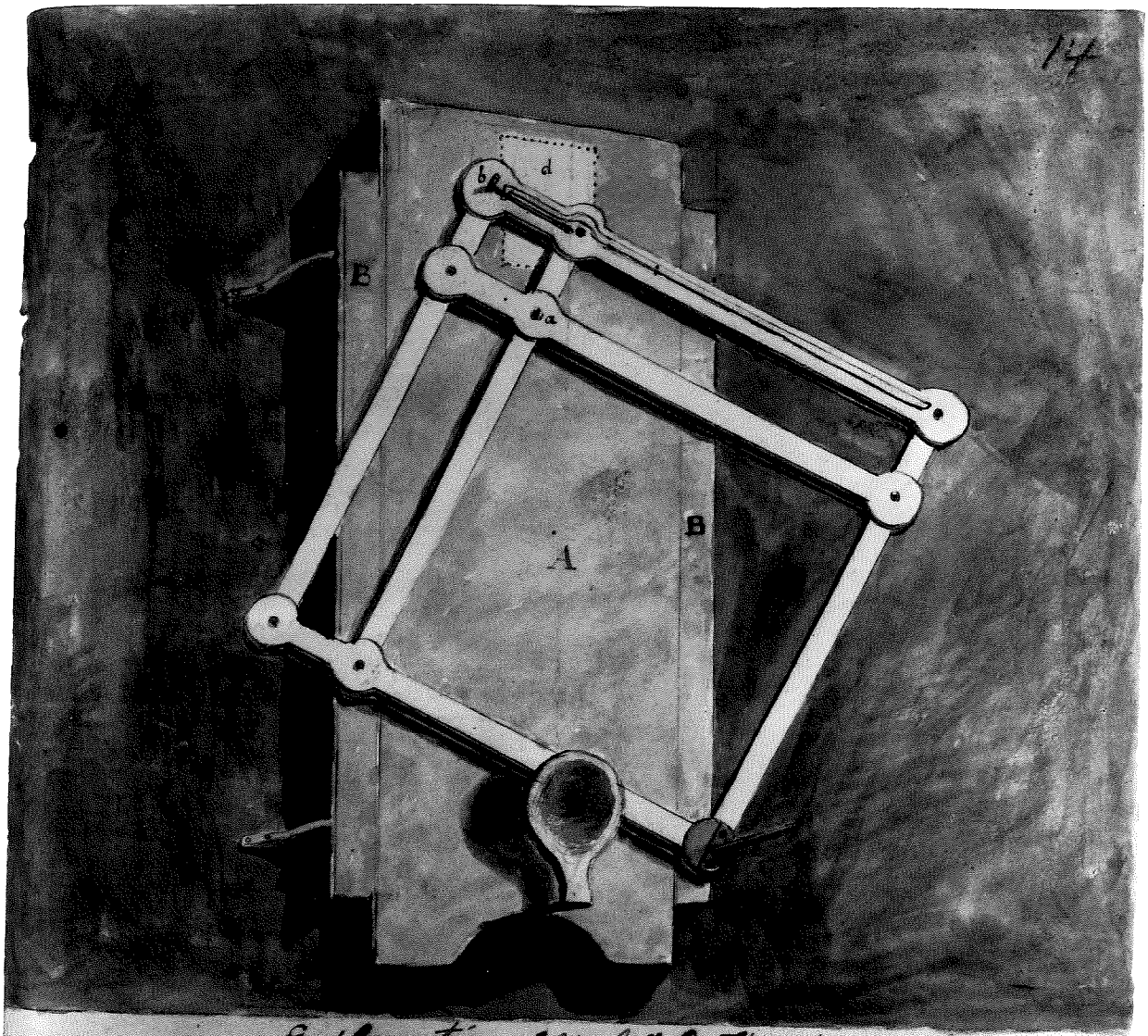
It is important to note that Charles Willson Peale made only a few silhouettes himself, but the family name or "Peale Museum" is used as an attribution for these objects unless the actual cutter is known. In part, this is because many, though not all, of the hollow-cuts made at the Peale Museum have an uninked "blind" stamp under the bust that reads either "Peale" or "Peale Museum."[41] Such a stamp is visible in the hollow-cut Williams made, entitled *Mr. Shaw's Blackman* (see cat. 5).[42]

Having one's silhouette taken with the device at the museum was the rage from 1802–5, and it remained fashionable through the first decade of the nineteenth century. After that time, enthusiasm waned somewhat, though silhouettes made with tracing devices remained moderately popular until supplanted by photographs in the forties.

Hawkins's machine differed from Chrétien's and others in that it traced around the actual face with a small "index" bar made of brass that was connected to a pantograph that simultaneously reduced the silhouette to nearly two inches (fig. 7). Examination of a reproduction of the physiognotrace revealed that the opening where the paper fit in was about four by four inches.[43] It was not uncommon for four hollow-cuts to be done at one time by folding the paper twice.[44] Peale explained his device in a letter to Thomas Jefferson in January 1803:

> The person to be traced, setting in a Chair, rests their head on the concave part, & the hollow of the board below imbraces the shoulder. The Physiognotrace is fixed to the board, A at a, and in the center of the joint b, is a conic steel point with a spring to press it against the paper . . . This index moving round to trace any subject that the edge is kept too, as it moves, the steel point of the upper joint, gives a diminished size a perfectly correct representation.[45]

Though Hawkins and the Peales filed patents to protect the physiognotrace from being copied, there were many versions being used all over the East Coast, some of which predated Hawkins's. Peter Benes writes, "scores of portraitists, artists-entrepreneurs, and mechanicians rushed to take advantage of the popularity of cheap, machine-made profiles."[46] Many contraptions were very similar to Hawkins's patented version, while others were truly different. Some used optical projection, like the camera obscura, to capture a profile on paper that, while being traced, was also reduced with an attached pantograph. This device had the advantage that the sitter was not "scraped with the machine,"[47] as happened when the brass index of Hawkins's machine passed over one's features. William Bache, along with Isaac Todd and Augustus Day, patented a physiognotrace machine that was likely used to make the works of his that are included in the *Black Out* exhibition (see cat. 6).[48]



Explanation of Mr. Jno. J. Hawkins's Physiognotrace

A is a board that moves up and down in the frame B, B. which is fastened to the wall with brackets C C. — This movement is contrived to suit the height of different persons, and it is secured to its place by means of a screw on the back part. — D is a hollow board projecting 2½ inches, to allow the Pentagraph to move behind it. The person to be traced, setting in a chair, rests their head on the concave part, & the hollow of the board below embraces the shoulder. — The Physiognotrace is fixed to the board A at a, and in the center of the joint b, is a conic steel point with a spring to push it against the paper, represented by the dotted line. The steel point is

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Though "physiognotrace" was the commonly used term for these tracing mechanisms, there were other names for the various related inventions, including the eidograph, limomachia, pasigraph, prosopographus, profilograph, Charles Schmalcalder's delineator, facietrace, copier, proportionometer, and William King's "patent delineating pencil."[49]

When examining hollow-cuts, it is possible to find some evidence of a tracing apparatus. Either a graphite or metal tip was used—there are often traces of graphite or indented lines visible along the outline of the face. This can be seen in the hollow-cut of Moses Williams (cat. 3).[50] The evidence of the steel point is present as small linear indents by the hair ribbon and neckline. However, since the profiles were cut after having been traced, such evidence has often been trimmed away. Moreover, as multiple hollow-cuts were made at once, frequently it is only the top one or two pieces of paper that bear the evidence. Hollow-cuts have another characteristic that can reveal their traced roots: they tend to be more generically and formulaically handled than other silhouette types.

In conclusion, silhouettes allowed the public from nearly all walks of life to have a portrait taken with relative ease and for only a small amount of money. Tourists visiting a museum or a seaside resort could easily stumble into a silhouettist snipping away. Imagine, this is the first time people could possess an inexpensive, nearly instantaneous likeness of themselves or a loved one—before the silhouette, portraiture was for the royal and the wealthy. This accessible form of portraiture grew out of a craze for the antique, which only enhanced the silhouette's cultural attraction. The silhouette's popularity spread from elite environs to the everyday sitting room. Many people felt inspired to try their hand at the craft. They used a candle to cast a shadow or a pencil to draw freehand before taking up scissors to create an instant likeness of the sitter. In turn, the diversity of makers engendered a multiplicity of techniques and materials used to produce silhouettes. To our modern eye these portraits often appear generic or of a type, but in fact, many cutters went to great lengths to personalize their silhouettes. They did this through unique accessories and details, such as ribbons and curls. They added occasional personal effects, such as hair or a significant textile fragment. And they incorporated inscriptions and signatures to enhance the historical uniqueness of these humble yet remarkable, democratic objects.

7.
Explanation [and Illustration] of J. I. Hawkins's Physiognotrace
1803
Drawing
Library of Congress