The Interest That Attaches To Silhouettes

By Constance Chisholm.

TO the fact that in the wake of "The World in Baltimore" a clever silhouettist came and demonstrated his skill in cutting outline presentments of so many of our well-known people is doubtless due to the present craze for a specimen of the art of the scissors, for everywhere you go your friends proudly show you their shadow pictures framed in a little oval or round frame painted black and quite like those, in effect, that have come down from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century days; save that these silhouettes of the present moment not only lack the yellowing and mellowing touch of time on the background of white, but also that aspect of quaintness inseparable from the costuming—and especially the hatting—of a bygone period.

Nevertheless, these newly-cut silhouettes are good things to pass down; even though, because of the splendid photography of our time, we can supplement the outline picture with an accurate and finished portraiture unknown to our forefathers; who must sit to a painter and pay his prices before—except for the silhouette—they could enable posterity to know aught of their physiognomy.

Even a fine photograph fades and weakens its lines in the course of the years; but you remain as black in a silhouette as you were shown in the first instance, and as unchanging; this stability proving an inestimable boon to the sculptor of the future who may essay to put you in the Hall of Fame, for it was the clear outline shown in the silhouette of Chief Justice Marshall that Story followed when modeling his statue for the Capitol, at Washington, the original having been cut by William Henry Brown, who has been called the last of the silhouettists; meaning, in that sense, those who attained great celebrity in the art.

Though having shown some skill as a younger child, Brown, then in his sixteenth year, exhibited his first silhouette of a public man in 1824—that of Lafayette—and this was followed by scores of others—those of Webster, Winfield Scott, Andrew Jackson, Bishop White and John Randolph of Roanoke being among the most striking, especially the latter, who is shown as he looked in 1830 when starting for Russia, pronounced by Henry Clay to be the very perfection of the silhouettist's art. Brown was born in Charleston in 1808 and died there in 1883, having, during his life, gone well over the country pursuing his vocation. His silhouette of Lincoln was cut when his skill was waning and is thought to be less successful than numerous others.

Many people, among them, sometimes, those who cherish a rare inherited one, do not seem to know how the silhouette got its name, supposing it to be derived from some root signifying a shadow. This is not the case, for while outlining portraits in black was an ancient art, shown in early Egyptian and Etruscan pictorial inscriptions, our word for them today comes from Etienne de Silhouette, French Minister of Finance, in 1759, whose rigid economy, intended to avert national bankruptcy, made the thoughtless populace derisively apply his name to everything costing but little money. Being one of the cheap things, this name fastened itself to the portraits in black showing the profile as cast by a person's shadow.

The fad for these had been introduced by Mme. Pompadour—not, surely, because they cost little, but as a whim of her fancy; and from the court circles they extended to the masses who saw in them their one possible chance of portraiture; sitting, not to the silhouettist of our present methods, but between a lighted candle and a sheet of paper hung on the wall, on which the flame cast their profile in somber intensity, this being traced by a careful hand and then cut out.

It is said that the first silhouettes made in this country were those cut at Charles Willson Peale's museum in Philadelphia late in the eighteenth century, done with great accuracy by a machine. Washington and other famous men had their silhouettes cut by this method, which claimed mathematical exactness—that of the General appearing in one of our leading magazines in 1897.

But the first of the silhouettists coming to this country who caught the likeness with the scissors as the artist catches it with the brush, was William James Hubard, arriving in New York in 1824. Two years earlier the Duchess of Kent had recognized his talent and given his work publicity in having him cut the silhouettes of the royal household, including that of the baby Princess Victoria, the future Queen of England; and these portraits he brought with him as credentials of skill with which to win American patronage. Hubard, who was "managed" as stars are managed today, was also taken to Boston and later to Philadelphia, exhibiting silhouettes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1826, 1827 and 1828, which, says Charles Henry Hart, was pretty good evidence of their merit. He later evoluted from silhouette cutting to painting in oils, studying under Sully and exhibiting a portrait at the Academy in 1829, and became known for his small full-length portraits in cabinet size. He was in Baltimore for a time before settling in Richmond, where he died in 1862.

But few of his silhouettes are known to be his, as it seems he did not always sign them, yet those which may be in this city could probably be identified as his chronologically, and a Hubard silhouette is a good one to own.

Some years later than Hubard there came to this country the silhouettist who is the most noted of them all, August Edouart, a Frenchman who served under Napoleon.

Losing his possessions in the downfall of the Empire, Edouart discovered that he could cut silhouettes, doing them so well that in 1835 he published a book, entitled "A Treatise on Silhouette Likenesses by Monsieur Edouart, Silhouettist to the French Royal Family and patronized by his Royal Highness the late Duke of Gloucester and the principal Nobility of England, Scotland and Ireland."

This shows that he, too, was duly backed up by foreign patrons of high degree when he came over to capture American dollars in 1838, remaining here nine years and cutting a great number of silhouettes. Unlike most of the workers in his line, Edouart was careful and methodical in his efforts to preserve to posterity the identity of his sitters, keeping in large books, in spaces arranged for the purpose, a duplicate of every portrait, beneath which he wrote the name and the date necessary for identification.

Hart says of these that there were "numerous somebodies among innumerable nobodies." But, as Edouart was in Baltimore pursuing his art in 1840, there may be a number of families here that treasure a "somebody"—nay, there must be—and such have a rare prize, as only 14 volumes, and those seriously damaged ones, have survived the 50 with which Edouart started back home to France in 1847. Even a "nobody" silhouette, if proved to be an Edouart, may soon come to rate high, just in the same way—though less in degree—that an unknown old housefrau or tavern host becomes a priceless portrait because the work of a Holbein or a Franz Hals, for the ship in which he embarked was wrecked off the coast of Guernsey, all his precious cuttings going overboard. Of these, the 14 rescued volumes were given by Edouart to the Lukis family, on the coast, who took him in and befriended him when saved from the wreck, and it has been the great good fortune of Mr. Neville Jackson, while seeking data for a history of silhouettes, to rediscover these books of cuttings still in the possession of the Lukis descendants. And it was, truly, a splendid "find," not only, primarily, that it gives historians, artists and sculptors a chance to duplicate in engraved illustration, on canvas or in marble, the lineaments of a notability of the past, but a find of great personal interest to the descendants of those whose effigies are in the recovered volumes, for they might be able, at least, to have the silhouette duplicated by a modern cutter, or, by means of comparison, they may verify a silhouette they have as the duplicate of the one preserved by Edouart.

In these days of collecting, one imagines that when the fad for collecting silhouettes is nearing its height the original Edouarts—like the long-forgotten and recently unearthed Brady plates of Civil War photographs—will soon have soared to prohibitive prices, even as the eighteenth century color prints which originally cost but a shilling or two are now changing hands for thousands. A pity it is, surely, that these rescued silhouettes cannot, in every case, come into the possession of those who would so cherish them as family treasures.

Mr. Jackson, the finder, says: "The value of this collection lies in the complete detail given with each and the undoubted authority of the portraits." He also says that in the folio for the year 1840 there are shown 531 portraits, including those taken in New York, Brooklyn, Saratoga, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington and Delaware. In the Log Cabin campaign year of 1841 he cut 765 silhouettes, including Harrison, Tyler, Quincy Adams and Henry Clay. Some time in his career Sir Walter Scott and Longfellow were his sitters, and in 1844 he made over a thousand outline pictures. He abandoned his art after his shipwreck and two years later, in 1861, died in France, aged 73.

As every one who owns an old unsigned oil portrait tries to find what artist painted it, rejoicing when, in some old letter or diary dated long ago, it is recorded that "today father sat for his portrait," naming the artist, even so should the owner of an old silhouette search among family records to see whether it can be attributed to the physiognotrace used at Peale's Museum, to Hubard or to Edouart. If executed by either of the last named, it will rank as a silhouette as an old portrait ranks when proved to have been the work of an artist of reputation.

Some people ask how an Edouart silhouette, cut in 1840, or even those of Hubard, in 1826, can be of any great importance, not dating, they say, far enough back to be antiques.

To this it should be answered that these silhouettes of 70 and 90 years ago preceded the introduction of daguerreotypes and photography, and who does not now consider an early daguerreotype an antique. Though Daguerre perfected his process about 1840, portraits by his method were not taken in this country immediately, and the earliest photography was ten years later.

Many countries have had gifted silhouettists, but we are chiefly interested in those who came here and "took" our own people. Among the late ones, cut in this city in November by Henry Ackley Sackett, is an excellent silhouette of former Governor Warfield, and though, happily, there are portraits that preserve the fine coloring of eyes, complexion and hair, we may well imagine that in years to come the descendants of our distinguished Marylander will cherish this silhouette even as we so prize the older ones, for the silhouette has a charm and quaintness all its own.