



# SHADOWS FROM THE PAST

Whatever they're called—silhouettes, profiles, physiognotracés, shadow pictures, shades—these intriguing examples of folk art have lasting appeal.



By Jane Viator

In today's visual world, pictures of family, friends, and newsmakers are as close as a cell phone or computer screen. It can be hard to imagine a time when a likeness, as it used to be called, was rare and costly. That began to change in the 18th century.

Beginning in the 1700s, archeological discoveries of ancient coins and pottery with profile images revived this once-popular art form. The side view of faces and figures is the most characteristic and easily identifiable outline, and simplified profile portraits became affordable for almost everyone.

From about 1750 until 1850, the little images originally known as "shades" or "shadow pictures" became a readily available form of portraiture that required little time or special equipment.

While only the very wealthy could afford a large portrait painted in oil or a delicate watercolor miniature on ivory, a black-and-white profile typically cost only a few cents, even if done by a professional.

Many silhouettes were done by

Above is a high-end silhouette: an Augustin Edouart work worth around \$20,000.

amateurs; it was considered a suitable amusement for young ladies. Among the most famous pair of silhouettes known were those that captured George and Martha Washington. The artist was Mrs. Washington's granddaughter, Nellie Custis.

Americans made thousands and thousands of silhouettes starting around 1790 all the way to 1850 (when they were largely replaced by photographs). Today, attractive examples from that period can be bought for \$200 and sometimes less. However, says Karen Langberg of Skinner Inc., fine pieces in excellent condition are relatively rare and bring four- and five-figures sums.

Jane Viator is a writer and decorative arts consultant based in Walnut Creek, Calif. Her work has appeared in every issue of Insider, dating to July 2001. Last month, she wrote about Cartier jewelry.



**FRENCH CONNECTION**  
The term "silhouette" started as a joke in the late 1700s, taken from the name of Etienne de Silhouette, Louis XV's finance minister. It's said that Silhouette liked making paper cutouts himself and used them as inexpensive decoration in his chateau. Furthermore, he tried to introduce money-saving measures seen as overly strict, so his name was mockingly given to the inexpensive art form. Augustin Edouart thought the French term "silhouette" was more elegant than "shade," so he popularized the word.

## RARE BEAUTIES

Occasionally tiny silhouettes as small as ¼-inch high were mounted in rings, brooches, and pins. These little treasures were made as keepsakes or commemorative pieces. They were never common, because the custom-made mounting was much more costly than the image itself. The rare survivors are among the most expensive types of profile art. Also scarce: American painted silhouettes. Usually done in black ink on paper, they account for fewer than 1 in 12 examples of the form.

## FIND ON THE ROAD

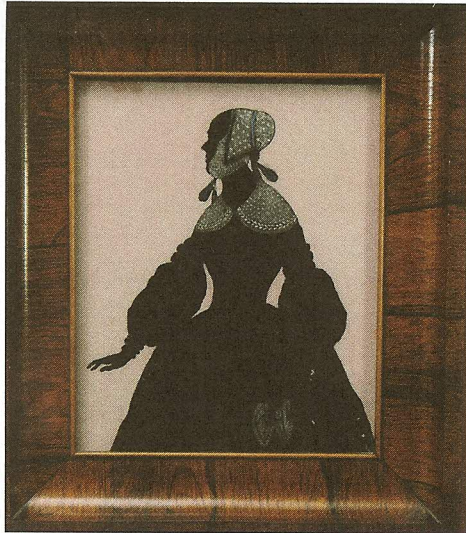
During *Antiques Roadshow's* 2011 broadcast season, you'll see a segment on silhouette artist Augustin Edouart. In Miami during the 2010 tour, appraiser Nancy Druckman of Sotheby's put a \$6,000–\$8,000 estimate on a group of four Edouart silhouettes, one of which captured American statesman Daniel Webster (1782–1852). The segment airs on Jan. 10, during Hour 2 of *Antiques Roadshow's* Miami Beach episodes. (See p. 2 for a full broadcast schedule.)



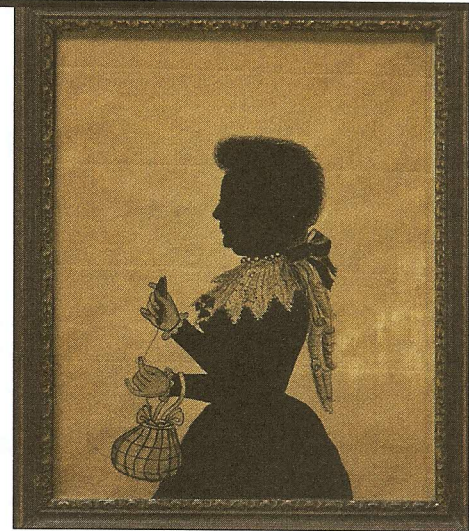
You'll see Nancy Druckman of Sotheby's appraise this quartet of silhouettes on *Antiques Roadshow* on Jan. 10.

Photos courtesy Peggy McClard Americana & Folk Art/Private Collection





Left: example of a silhouette reverse-painted on glass. American silhouette artists did not reverse-paint on glass silhouettes, so we always know these are English or Continental. These are interesting because the artist had to start with the tiniest detail and then work backwards to the black profile. At right: a painted silhouette of a woman tanning from c. 1790, still in its original frame.



outline profile, the white negative was placed over paper or fabric, usually black, but occasionally other colors. Most U.S. silhouettes were hollow-cut.

Some silhouette-makers were free-hand artists who could cut an accurate portrayal without drawing an outline or using tracing aids. These silhouettes were cut from black paper and then pasted onto a light background.

Such cut-and-paste silhouettes were often placed on a lithographed or painted scene, such as a handsomely furnished room or picturesque landscape.

### HANDS ACROSS THE SEA

Most American silhouettes date from after the Revolutionary War, when the fashion for shadow portraits, as they were then called, was imported from Europe. Many of the professional artists were also English or French by birth. English profilists who worked in the new U.S. included Samuel Metford, noted for his family groups, and Master William Hubbard, a teenage prodigy who had sensational success cutting freehand portraits.

Charles Saint-Mémin, a French

nobleman, had lost his property during the French Revolution and came to New York in 1793, where he supported himself making cutouts and miniature engraved portraits before becoming a landscape painter and portraitist in oil.

The most prominent, prolific, and today the most sought-after silhouettist was another French ex-soldier, Augustin Edouart. During his American stay from 1839 through 1849, he is believed to have made some 10,000 freehand silhouette portraits, most of them full-length and many of them featuring prominent political figures; including six presidents and ex-presidents.

Peggy McClard, a Texas-based folk art dealer with a special interest in silhouettes, notes that Edouart silhouettes bring very high prices. His large "conversation" pieces are especially desirable. These complex silhouette scenes typically show a family group (and often their pets and hobbies) placed against a detailed background that offers much visual information about furniture and decorative arts of the period.

### HOME-GROWN TALENT

The names of many American silhouettists are known from signatures on surviving examples. Some of the most prominent were William Bache, William Doyle, Henry Williams, William King, Charles Willson Peale, and Moses Chapman. Artists who were better known for other types of work occasionally turned to silhouette-cutting for fast cash; among them: Gilbert Stuart and John James Audubon.

The experts we consulted agree that the quality of execution and condition, and the attractiveness of the subject matter are the most important

### CLIP ART

One technique for making shadow pictures called for the sitter to be positioned so that a strong light cast his or her profile onto a piece of paper. The artist traced an outline and then cut it out with fine embroidery scissors or, less frequently, a sharp knife.

Another method used a mechanical contraption called a "physiognotrace." A metal bar connected to a stylus or pencil was moved over the subject's profile, allowing the artist to trace the outline on a piece of paper. The tracing mechanism was often connected to a pantograph, a simple device that could make the life-size image smaller.

These types of shadow pictures, called hollow cuts, were drawn on white paper. After the center was cut out, leaving the



This is an English silhouette pendant from the studio of John Miers (the work is attributed to John Field while he worked for Miers). It is painted, probably on plaster (some were painted on ivory) and dates to c. 1791–1800, the time this trade label was used. The pendant measures 1 1/8 inches tall and has a convex glass cover on the back that covers plaited hair. It's signed "Miers" directly under the bust-line termination.





Above: This is “very much the penultimate in desirability of American folk silhouettes,” says Peggy McClard. It’s attributed to the “Puffy Sleeve Artist,” an anonymous American artist who worked in New England. “Silhouettes made by the artist are much copied, and fakes are widely sold,” she says. “Sellers tend to use the phrase ‘Puffy Sleeve silhouette’ to describe all kinds of silhouettes where the women have puffy sleeves on their dresses to attract attention.”

determinants of value. (Desirable subjects among collectors today include pretty girls, charming children, and Revolutionary War heroes or other identifiable subjects.) The signature of a well-known and highly regarded artist is helpful, but not definitive.

Many silhouette artists have a recognizable style. One important clue, in the absence of a signature or stamp, is the way in which the curve at the bottom of the bust is cut. Other distinguishing characteristics include accessories such as books or eyeglasses and the way details of hair and clothing are depicted.

Before setting out to buy some examples that appeal to you, consider the advice of Peggy McClard. “Read all the information you can find on 18th- and 19th-century silhouettes,” she says. “Look at silhouette collections of museums and at shows; museums will often allow people to look at silhouettes that are not on display if an appointment is made in advance.”

Keep in mind, too, that silhouettes can turn up unexpectedly. Not infrequently they were stored between the pages of a book (such as a family bible) to keep them safe until they were framed. Some are found in mixed lots at country auctions. Watch for the shadows.... ❁

CUT IT OUT!

The high end of every area of antiques and collectibles attracts fakes and misrepresentations. Sellers of questionable items aren’t necessarily unscrupulous; sometimes they’re just careless or ignorant. So it’s important for buyers to be informed.

Extra caution is advised if you’re considering buying a silhouette of well-known subjects such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, or other prominent historical figures. These are the most often reproduced (and faked) because they’re so desirable to collectors.

There was a major revival in interest in silhouettes in the 1920s. Some of the examples from that era are now old enough to mislead the casual collector. Helpful hints for spotting not-so-old silhouettes:

- **Old hollow-cut silhouettes were sometimes mounted on silk velvet,** but the antique textile has a very different appearance from the cotton velveteen found in some more modern examples.
- **Cut-and-paste fakes are sometimes mounted on old paper.** Framed examples may also have old printed material pasted over the back to discourage close inspection.
- **Know your history, especially hair and clothing styles.** These details readily show the difference between early 1800s (relatively rare and valuable) and Colonial Revival or modern copies.

Also, keep in mind that signatures, stamps, and labels can be faked. Dealer/collector Peggy McClard warns specifically about profiles attributed to Charles Willson Peale, a prominent 19th-century artist and entrepreneur. “More likely than not, any silhouette with the stamp ‘PEALE’S MUSEUM’ under a spread eagle is a fake,” according to McClard. “In the 1920s a couple of antique dealers in New York acquired Peale’s embossing device and produced hundreds if not thousands of supposed Peales.”

Tell-tales clues: the fakes are larger (8 x 6 inches instead of 4½ x 3½); the paper is high-acid and thus browner and “older-looking” than genuine ones; and the Peale stamp is placed farther away from the cut-out image.

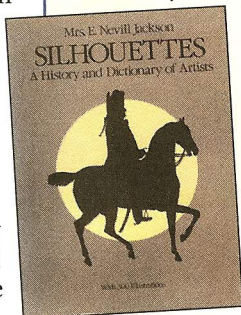


Here’s a Charles Willson Peale hollow-cut silhouette from the Philadelphia Museum. It probably was cut by African-American silhouettist Moses Williams, who bought his freedom by managing Peale’s silhouette cutting business and continued running the business even as a freedman. Value: around \$550. Such Museum silhouettes are plentiful and, depending on condition, the frame, and whether the sitter is identified, can be found for \$200 and up.

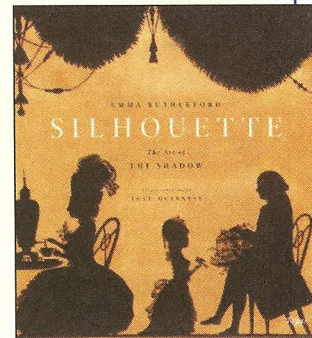
SOURCES & RESOURCES

Use the Internet to your advantage in learning more about silhouettes. Here’s a selection of sites to see:

- **PeggyMcClard.com:** Offers good images (with prices) and informative essays on several aspects of silhouette art, including a brief history and biographies of artists.
- **MoreSilhouettes.blogspot.com:** Useful blog by an enthusiastic, well-informed collector.
- **AntiquesandFineArt.com:** Click on “Articles” and enter “silhouette” in the search box to access several informative articles.



Among the worthy books written on the topic is *Silhouettes*, by E. Nevill Jackson (cover shown at left). Published in 1989 as a reprinting of Jackson’s 1938 standard reference book on the history of silhouettes and their makers, it covers European as well as American examples. Also worth a look: *Silhouette/The Art of the Shadow*, by Emma Rutherford (Rizzoli, 2009; cover shown above).



Photos courtesy Peggy McClard Americana & Folk Art/Private Collection