BLACK OUT: SILHOUETTES THEN AND NOW


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Two reasons account for silhouettes’ success. First, the cutouts were convincing portraits because the edges of the cutouts matched the outline of a person, animal, object or scene. In addition, devices like a physiognomotrace allowed for their rapid and inexpensive production. Indeed, even the term silhouette speaks to the form’s economical quality. Adopted from the name of Etienne de Silhouette (1709–1767), who had served as a cost-cutting finance minister to King Louis XV (although for only eight months), the term alludes to this minister’s attempts to stem the spiraling deficits of the court expenditures, which led to the labeling of cheap products (like the inexpensive paper cutouts) as silhouettes. While the medium became popular in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, the earliest known paper cutout was probably a double portrait of the English monarchs William and Mary I by Elizabeth Rhijbergh in the late seventeenth century. Auguste Amant Constant Fidele Edouart (1789–1861), who called himself a “black shade man,” is largely credited with popularizing the form.

Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now offers some insight into this history and serves as a thoughtful addition to the silhouette story as well. A beautifully produced original study, his book is primarily focused on the United States. Curator Asma Naeeem sets the stage in her introductory essay, writing:

Historical silhouettes were in certain ways the perfect aesthetic vehicle for a country reeling between moral and philosophical polarities regarding such issues as slavery and colonial independence. Silhouettes were a reconciling of paradoxes, not only aesthetic but also political and social, in terms of their merging of high and popular culture, their instability as fine art and handicraft, and their slippages between whiteness and blackness. . . . contemporary artists continue to manipulate these paradoxes (p. ix).

Despite the nod to contemporary art, the volume’s strength is its historical commentary. The title Black Out was chosen to underscore that the cutouts were predominately black in color and that this underinvestigated medium is largely blacked out of American history. Among the polarities are black versus white, how what we see is put together with the unseen and how positive and negative spaces are related in a cutout. As Naeeem notes, blackout also evokes something broader in a social context because the word is frequently used to speak about a loss of consciousness, what is kept in the dark and, by extension, what is erased from the art historical narrative.

This volume, a catalog for an exhibition at the National Portrait Gal-
lery in Washington DC, reflects the venue's mission to collect the faces of American history, as do the myriad of examples the essays explore. Whether it is a slave portrait that accompanied a bill of sale, a characteristic representation of someone who could not afford a traditional portrait or sociological documentation of a same-sex relationship, the text opens a window onto lesser-known and underreported narratives. The assemblage deftly balances numerous political, economic and sociological issues with details from specific case studies, thus providing an expanded view of early America's pluralistic and diverse society. For example, one fascinating section discusses the Amistad, a slave vessel of which the African captives took control in July 1839. After killing some of the crew, they ordered the survivors to sail it to Africa. The sailors instead maneuvered the boat to the coast of Long Island, where it was seized. Before the captives were freed and returned to their homeland, John Warner Barber (1798-1885) made pantograph-based silhouette drawings and engravings of each [1]. Given how today's politicians seem less committed to elevating society than many of us would like, I was glad that Naeem noted that John Quincy Adams, then a former president, successfully defended the slaves against murder charges.

Naeem additionally proposes several rationales for why these paper cutouts are largely absent from the art historical canon. One complication is that silhouettes are neither prints per se nor drawings but nonetheless a part of print culture. Also, the simple profile forms were devalued as "fine art" because it was said they lacked an expression of artistic imagination and were frequently made with a mechanical device. Researchers thus tended to see them more in terms of an artisan-crafted imitation than fine art. Yet even as those in fine art circles disparaged such works as derivative copies, the handwork trades elevated them, seeing them as portraiture.

This paradoxical element and those inscribed in the portraits are especially fascinating. One is that these featureless images were also a remarkably effective and inexpensive way to quickly capture a convincing representation. Despite an empty interior, the edges of a silhouette result in a surprisingly captivating copy because the shape captures contours, proportions and, in the case of a portrait, the relationship of the bony structures of the face (the forehead, nose and chin). Moreover, even given its plainness and a lack of the kind of refinement found in a traditional full-face portrait, part of a silhouette's charm stems from the way the end result offers a clear sense of the original form. Black Out demonstrates what especially distinguished the paper cutouts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is that this speedy form of representation was inexpensive enough to make portraiture available to all, much like mobile phones do today. But, as Naeem points out, not all silhouettes were created equally. Who one was had an impact on silhouette production. For black individuals, it was often as if they were being presented with a minimal level of detail, to sell them, track them down after escape and so forth. Whites, by contrast, were presenting themselves.

Even though all silhouettes were devoid of detail, the lack of specificities for white sitters was compensated for by the ways in which they were created as objects of affection and, subsequently, how they were preserved as familial documents. The biographical specificities of silhouettes of white individuals, in other words, were also centrifugally created outside of the objects themselves. Conversely, the lack of such compensating externalities for black sitters "black out" their personhood (p. 28).

Background detail that extends the phenomenon beyond the American experience adds to the volume's value. The book both helpfully summarizes earlier profile portraits and places the study within the broader time frame. For example, it notes that the featureless profile was also used to illustrate scientific, physiognomic theories, bolstered by people like Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801). These researchers claimed that the shape of the skull determined an individual's psychological attributes. Yet, paradoxically, while the "scientific" portraits offer some indication of skull structure, like the cutout profiles, they represent who an individual is on the outside. Neither gives substantial visual insight into their inner qualities. Art/entertainment forms like shadow theater entertainment, a popular form throughout Europe in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, had a similar look. Here flat articulated cutout figures are held between a source of light and a translucent screen or scrim. Several catalog entries show that full-figure cutouts superimposed on lithographic scenes create a similar visual look.

After Naeem's opening essay, Alexander Nemerov's piece features Martha Ann Honeywell (1786-1856). Born in New Hampshire without arms and with only three toes on one foot, Honeywell signed her work "Cut by Martha Ann Honeywell, born without arms," indicative of her pride in her work and her unusual process. Honeywell worked with her toes and used a combination of her mouth, toes and one of her stump arms to cut paper. Largely an itinerant artist—as was common for silhouette makers to market their wares at that time—she was also a feature attraction at the Peale Museum in Philadelphia.
from 1828 to 1829. Moses Williams, a male mulatto who was eventually manumitted by the Peale family, was another unconventional nineteenth-century silhouette maker. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw presents his story. Like Honeywell, he was connected to the Peale Museum, the first natural history museum in the United States, founded by Charles William Peale (1741–1827), an American painter, soldier, scientist, inventor, politician and naturalist now remembered for this museum and his portrait paintings of leading figures of the American Revolution. Peale added a silhouette-drawing machine, a physiognomotrace machine, to his museum in 1803 and Williams operated it. Moses Williams's relationship with Peale was complicated and quite representative of the time. For example, due to his heritage and position, the Williams portraits for the Peale Museum were sometimes attributed to Charles or his son Rembrandt Peale (1776–1860).

The third essay, by Penley Knipe, carefully examines silhouettes in terms of their material composition, telling us about the paper, the scissors and so forth. In addition, Anne Verplanck, a preeminent scholar on silhouettes in the United States, wrote the 49 catalog entries.

The limited space devoted to the four contemporary artists is my primary criticism of the book. Naeeem asserts that each of them reinterprets the silhouette as a mode of expression and appropriates components of the art form, be it the shadow, cutting of paper, flatness or blackness. She also argues that they deconstruct its historical value and specificity. I do not doubt that their stunning and complex works were an exciting part of the exhibition that this book catalogs. For this reader, however, the book cried out for a full essay and one that compared and contrasted the then and now positions, particularly since Naeeem mentioned that one impetus for the exhibition was the abundant evidence of the silhouette form in popular culture. This omission was even more striking given that historical silhouettes were represented in terms of their popularity and as a democratizing force within early America. Since Naeeem mentions that one incentive for the project was the evidence of the form in advertising and popular culture, not having an essay devoted to the high-low tension was inexplicable and seemed to devalue the reach of contemporary silhouettes.

A contemporary culture article might have delved into how the low-cost, popular exemplars surrounding us compare with historical examples in the space where high and popular culture meet. Such an essay might have looked at our avatars and mobile phones and the success of Apple's iPod and iTunes silhouette campaign, said to be one of the most successful advertising packages of the twenty-first century. Avatars, which Naeeem mentions in passing, are particularly interesting because they resonate with the personal/impersonal element of the medium historically. Some are customized to create a unique sense of whom they represent and, in this respect, emulate the individualized quality of the nineteenth-century silhouette. Other contemporary examples, like the unidentifiable Apple silhouette dancers, are more like an everyman (or "every person") image. The iPod ads are also intriguing because the iPod device was barely visible and despite this the faceless unidentifiable dancer drew consumers in, effectively allowing many of us to imagine our own person in the dancing form [2].

Instead, the "Now" section—essentially about seven pages of text and a few images—offers a sparse contemporary component. This material acquaints us with four female contemporary artists: two American MacArthur Fellows, Kara Walker and Camille Utterback; the Canadian artist Kristi Malakoff; and Kumi Yamashita, a Japanese-American artist. Of the four, Kara Walker was the best fit in terms of the visual, sociological and contextual narrative. Her panoramic silhouettes of plantation life and African American history intersected with sections of the book that explored issues related to race, slavery and memory.

The exceptional projects of Kristi Malakoff and Kumi Yamashita matched the form's block, cutout appearance but are quite limited in terms of their reach into the culture at large. Yamashita, a sculptor of light and shadow, manipulates inanimate objects like light and paper, wood or metal to create illusions of shadowed three-dimensional form, including profiles. Her works are optical illusion and to some degree function like a perspectival painting, given that the illusion is perceived when standing in front of the work and looking at it from its central axis. Perceptually ambiguous, these stunning mixed-media pieces are strikingly unlike the nineteenth-century silhouettes in several respects. First, her works are time intensive to put together. In addition, because there is no tangible object, there is nothing to hold or cherish. Also, unlike the physicality of an instantaneous profile, these works are intended to evoke impermanence: "For [Yamashita], shadows came to symbolize another dimension of life, perhaps something even more real than its holder" (p. 150).

Maibaum (2009), Kristi Malakoff's contribution, uses cut paper and foam core to make life-size sculptures depicting a scene of twenty children dancing with ribbons around a maypole as birds fly overhead. Like Yamashita's objects, it requires a fixed viewer position to see the entire work properly. Naeeem says that Malakoff explores the tensions between craft and art in this installation. To be sure, the materials are associated with crafts, but the size and complexity of this unique installation seems to belie the simplicity of the nineteenth-century cutouts.

Camille Utterback's commissioned interactive contribution, on the other hand, seemed completely out of place in this book. An interactive digital piece, it reacts to visitors' shadows and movements. No doubt it offered a fun, playful and appealing component within the gallery, but it is a stretch to call this shadow-play

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work portraiture or a cutout. It is ethereal and bears no resemblance to a silhouette-type portrait. It is the viewer, not the artist, who creates the image by moving through colorful shapes, lines and abstractions. Since Naeem was not limiting herself to American artists, someone like William Kentridge might have been a better fit for the fourth slot, since his silhouette progressions are a visual match and his art also critiques cultural narratives.

In summary, I am enthusiastic about this book but wish it had done more. Black Out’s insights deepen our understanding of early America through documentation of overlooked populations who are traditionally “blacked out” of history. It conveys the power and importance of silhouettes historically, capturing how this modality repositioned the portraiture realm. Informative essays capture how these incredibly popular forms made it easier for everyone to have a portrait before the advent of photography in 1839. Curator Asma Naeem, who recently became chief curator at Baltimore Museum of Art, also conveys that these forms were a fascinating, complicated and significant element within early America. Overall, the book’s strength is that it speaks to the lives of those without power. For this reason, I highly recommend it. It will be of particular interest to those interested in American history, for it is a reminder that traditional narratives tend to mitigate the breadth of social polarities and pluralism through their crafting of a dominant story, one that blurs our ability to perceive the underlying mosaic.

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References and Notes

1. The images and narrative are documented in A History of the Amistad Captives: Being a Circumstantial Account of the Capture of the Spanish Schooner Amistad, by the Africans on Board; Their Voyage, and Capture Near Long Island, New York; with Biographical Sketches of Each of the Surviving Africans; also, an Account of the Trials had on Their case, Before the District and Circuit Courts of the United States, for the District of Connecticut: www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh/barber/barber.html.

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