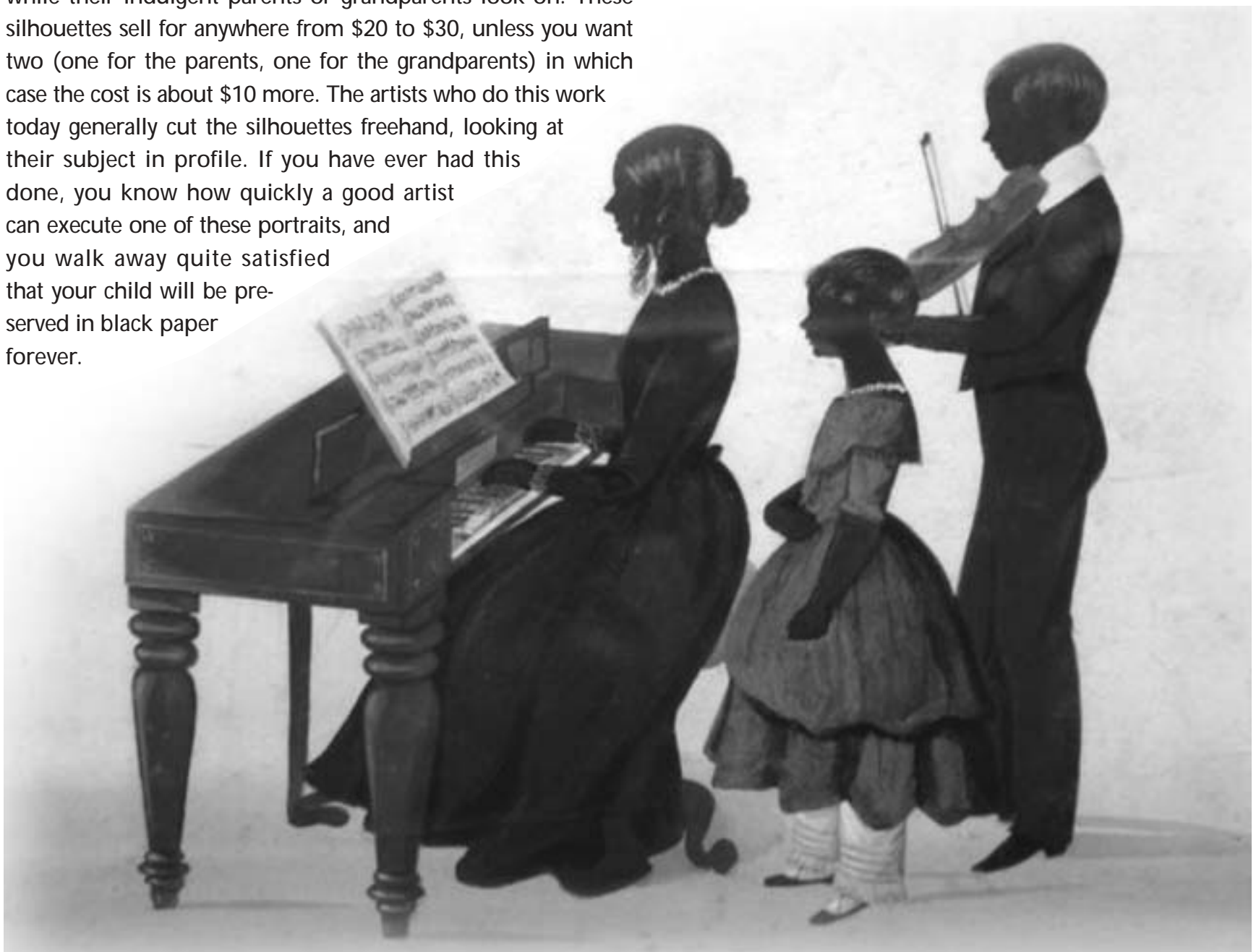


The Art of Silhouettes

by Joy Hanes

*A*t fairs and festivals across America we can often find a silhouette artist cutting profiles of squirming children while their indulgent parents or grandparents look on. These silhouettes sell for anywhere from \$20 to \$30, unless you want two (one for the parents, one for the grandparents) in which case the cost is about \$10 more. The artists who do this work today generally cut the silhouettes freehand, looking at their subject in profile. If you have ever had this done, you know how quickly a good artist can execute one of these portraits, and you walk away quite satisfied that your child will be preserved in black paper forever.



A painted silhouette depicting three children playing music. The detail on this one is superb, with added bronzing.

There is not a lot of difference between what happens at these fairs today, and the method of silhouette artists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These itinerant artists moved from town to town and city to city in search of subjects. In both England and America, silhouette artists would enter a new town and quickly begin advertising their location. If they had cut profiles of any royalty, that would, of course, be included in their promotions, as well as the speed with which they could produce the finished product (usually a couple of minutes or less). In England, artists visited the fashionable resorts on the coast and in Bath, as well as major cities.

The Art of the Silhouette

The word silhouette appears to have come from Etienne de Silhouette, the French minister of finance in 1757, who made so many cuts to the state budget that anything done inexpensively was referred to as "*à la silhouette*." Some believe that he actually cut silhouettes as a hobby. This makes a good story, but no one can confirm or deny it, so we cite it only as hearsay.

The popularity of silhouettes rose in the late eighteenth century. They were a cheap and fast means of producing a portrait (the only other form of portraiture in a small size at that time was the expensive portrait miniature, usually painted on ivory with watercolors, which was a detailed and time-consuming art, requiring multiple sittings). Many of the earliest silhouette artists were also portrait miniature painters. One can imagine that, as the popularity of "shades" (as they were then called) increased, the artist would offer his subjects a choice between the two types of portrait. Some proponents of the silhouette thought that the character of the sitter could be represented more accurately when the full features were not delineated.

Some silhouettists devised mechanical means of casting a person's shadow onto a screen and cutting or drawing the portrait from that. Others were proud of their ability to create a portrait freehand, and many advertised that they produced silhouettes "without mechanical devices."

Many collectors and dealers consider silhouettes to be folk art. The many definitions of folk art all boil down to its being done by people with no training, and most often by anonymous artists. The silhouette artists in England in the period discussed here were by no means anonymous, and although some were self-taught, many had some kind of artistic background, and they attempted to make their living by their craft. We should perhaps think of silhouettes as popular, rather than folk, art.

But there were amateur cutters. Several silhouette artists advertised that they could teach the art of cutting profiles, and some schools for young ladies taught profile cutting as well. It was quite fashionable to become proficient in the art. It was customary at house parties in the country for one of the guests to cut silhouettes of everyone there, and paste them into an album with each person's name under his or her portrait. One imagines that the cutter would have used multiple layers of paper to create several albums so that each guest could take one home. Occasionally one of these house-party albums can be found intact, although more often they have been broken up and the silhouettes framed and sold separately.



A painted profile on plaster by Miers. From the collection of Candice Hern.

The Three Methods

There are three methods of creating a silhouette. The first, which some people think is the only one, involves cutting the profile from black paper and mounting it on a white background. It appears that the artists had to prepare their own black paper, as there is no evidence of any of the stationers or other artist's suppliers selling it. If you can ever take a peek at the back of an early silhouette, you will see that the back is white. Researchers are not sure if there was a standard preparation or if each artist had his own recipe for the black coating. Some artists may have coated the paper after the silhouette was cut, while others may have pre-coated it to save time.

The second method is called "hollow cut" which produces a silhouette as a space cut into white paper. The outer section is then placed upon a dark background, usually of fabric. Hollow cuts were primarily done in America. Occasionally one can find the white "inside" of the hollow cut mounted on black paper, thus producing a reverse copy of the original.

The third method is by painting. We have spoken to collectors who don't think that painted silhouettes are technically the real thing, but we assure them that they are! Silhouettes were painted on paper, on glass, on plaster, and on ivory.

Silhouettes were often enhanced with either gold (called bronzing) or white, and in some cases color

"We should perhaps think of silhouettes as popular, rather than folk, art."

was added as well. The practice of enhancement didn't become widespread until the 1840s, when photography was coming into popularity and silhouettes found themselves in direct competition with this new form of fast and cheap portraiture. Early photography was, of course, limited to



Detail of a full-length silhouette by Frith. Note the liberal use of bronzing, as well as the details in white.



A cut-out and painted silhouette of an equestrienne with dog, c. 1820. The horse is painted in dark brown, and the figure of the woman is black with added gold highlights. It is unusual to find several colors on a cutout.



A painted and bronzed portrait of the young Queen Victoria, probably done around the time of her coronation.

■ FEATURE

monochrome images.

Conversation groups, which showed a group of people (most often a family) engaging in various activities in a room, were popular in the late eighteenth-century. Some of the eighteenth-century silhouette artists painted these conversation groups on glass; others painted them on card or paper. They would often depict an interior, with portraits on the walls, fireplaces and furniture, as well as favorite pets.

Three Collectible Artists

John Miers: One of the earliest

One of the best and most enterprising of silhouettists was John Miers. He was the son of a coach painter who also supplied artists with their materials. John Miers was born in Leeds, England, in 1758, and in 1781 opened his first shop in his home city. He advertised: "Profile Shades in Miniature; most striking likenesses drawn and neatly framed at 2/6 (two shillings and six pence) each. A second draught from the same shade 2s." One of his earliest labels advertised that he had earned "the most flattering Encomiums, for giving the true Proportion and most animated Expression of the Features." This label was used in Manchester in 1784.

Within two years, Miers had run out of possible customers in Leeds, and between 1783 and 1786 he toured and set up shop in Newcastle, Manchester, Liverpool and Edinburgh. He eventually moved to London, where he painted silhouettes until about 1800.

Miers needed a sitting that lasted only two minutes. He would make the "likeness" (as he called it) any size desired, and would also paint silhouettes on ivory and mount them as pieces of jewelry. Apart from these special orders, he painted his silhouettes on plaster.

Although the sittings were brief, Miers probably took an hour or more to paint in the details. He often smudged the paint to give a translucent quality to the details, such as lace or hair.

Miers used different frames throughout the course of his career. Most commonly his silhouettes are found framed in oval pressed-brass frames.

Miers' work in London became so popular that he eventually took in other artists. The most prominent of these was Henry William Field, who basically took over all of the silhouette painting. He began working with Miers in 1793, and by 1801 was the only artist working there. In 1823, William Miers (John's son) and John Field (Henry William's son)

"The most flattering Encomiums, for giving the true Proportion and most animated Expression of the Features."

formed a partnership and continued painting profiles in the style of Miers. Their partnership dissolved six years later, as a result of property and business disputes.

Miers died in 1821, leaving behind a fortune of £20,000, which, in today's terms would be about \$2,000,000 (according to the calculations of Brian Dolan, author of *Wedgwood, the First Tycoon*).

Hubard: A Nineteenth-Century Prodigy

In the early nineteenth century, another silhouette artist-phenomenon came to light in the person of William James Hubard. He was born in 1809 in Whitchurch, Shropshire. The story goes that as a child he would amuse himself in church by cutting silhouettes of the parishioners. When he was 12 or 13, he acquired a man-

ager, one Mr. Smith, who created the Hubard Gallery in order to promote his young discovery. An 1823 advertisement for Hubard stated:

Just arrived at Mr. Critchfield's... *Master Hubard*, the celebrated little artist, who, by a mere glance at the face! And with a pair of common scissors! Not by the help of a Machine, nor from any Sketch with Pencil, Penn or Crayon, but from Sight alone!!! Cuts out the most spirited and Striking Likenesses in One Minute—Horses, Dogs, Carriages, in short every Object in nature and Art are the almost instantaneous productions of *His Talismanic Scissors*.

Prices are then given, ranging from 1s to 7s 6d for two full length portraits. He also advertised: "Families attended at their own houses; terms extra, if less than seven in number." So we are back to our house parties, only this time the entertainment is the young prodigy who will cut profiles of all the guests with his scissors.

Master Hubard traveled extensively throughout England and Scotland, and from there, set sail for New York, where he arrived in August of 1824. After two years, he set off for Boston. Probably around 1827 Hubard broke off from the gallery, and soon began painting portraits in oils. He became well known as a portrait painter, and left off his silhouette art at that point. He settled in Virginia, where he married. He was

killed during the Civil War when he had set up a foundry for making cannons, guns, and explosives. He was in the foundry in 1862 when a shell exploded, and died two days later. Much information about this artist is at the Valentine Museum in Richmond.

Although Hubard's silhouettes do not show the brilliant artistry of August Edouart, his youthful proficiency and celebrity in the States make him worth mentioning. He often enhanced the profiles with details in gold, though current scholarship feels that this may have been done by other people in the studio.

The Friths

There were three members of the Frith family, who called themselves the Royal Victoria Gallery. The father was a miniature portrait painter, and his two sons (Frederick and Henry Albert) set up as profile artists in London, and then in Limerick and other parts of Ireland. The brothers advertised that they had taken equestrian portraits of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and these were on display. It is often difficult to distinguish between the work of the two brothers, for their styles were similar, and they most often signed their work 'Frith,' without the use of initials.

The Friths were particularly proficient at adding highlights in gold, and their silhouettes abound with bronzed details. They also painted in backgrounds, which were not terribly detailed, but often gave an impression of a hill or mound of earth with tufts of grass, and occasionally other details. The stance of the men in all of the Frith silhouettes is the same, with the feet apart and one knee bent. The Friths excelled at portraits of officers, where they spared no expense in adding bronze highlights to the uniforms. Their women tended to be subtler, with either light bronzing or details picked out in white.

Conclusion

Of course the greatest silhouette artist of all was the Frenchman August Edouart, who arrived in England in 1829 and in America in 1839. His work and art has been well covered in many books and articles. Here, we have mentioned just three studios whose silhouettes are particularly interesting and beautiful, and that can be collected for far less outlay than Edouard's. ■



An unsigned cut-out and bronzed silhouette of a coachman and his dog. The details of this silhouette are extraordinary, including the individually cut out spokes of the wheels.



Even the dog is given careful treatment and elaborate bronzing.

