

Shady Ladies:

Female Silhouette Artists of the 18th Century

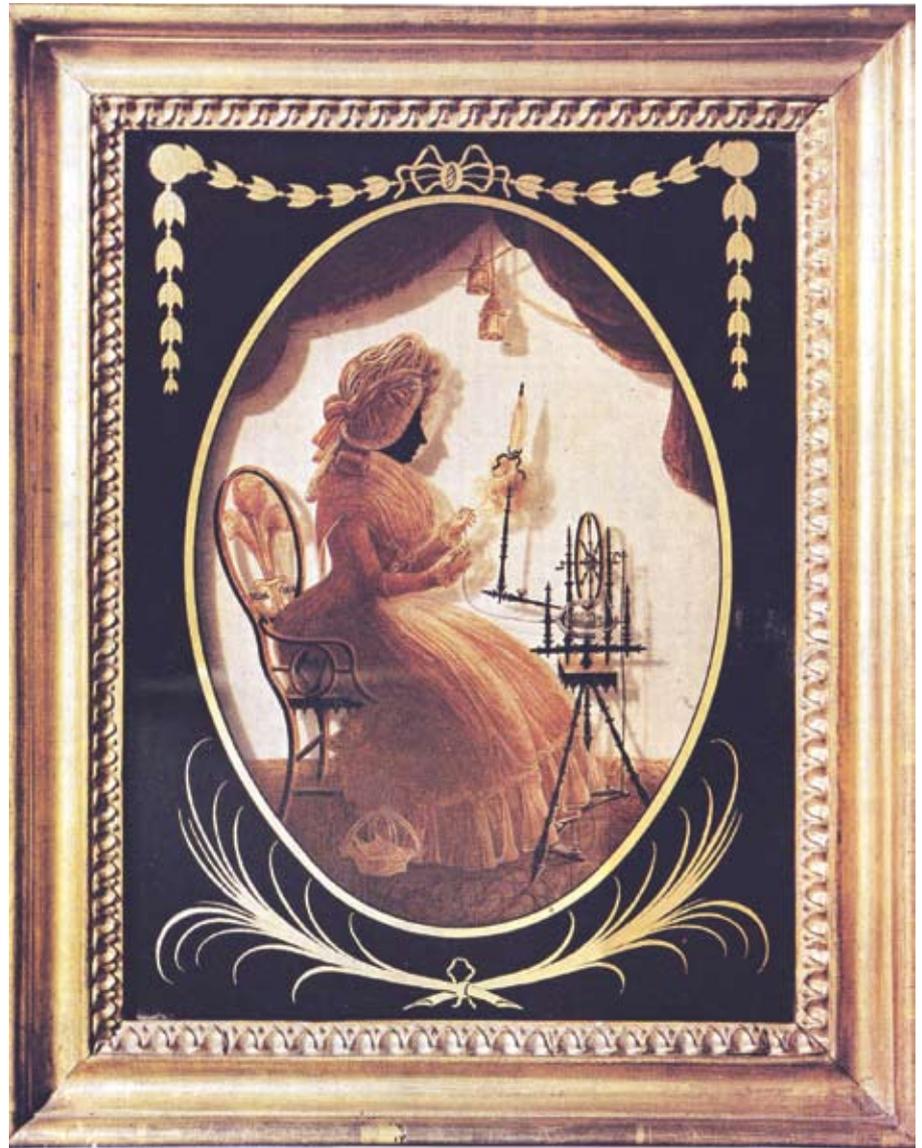
By Joy Ruskin Hanes

Silhouettes, shades or profiles date back to the earliest times, as evidenced in cave drawings dating back more than 32,000 years ago, and silhouette-like figures are often included in Egyptian and ancient Greek art. However, the profiles that we now know as “silhouettes” came to England in 1699. In that year, the first documented profiles were cut – they were of King William and his wife, Queen Mary. And the artist of these silhouettes? None other than a lady named Elizabeth Pyburg. Not much is known about her, but we do know that she cut profiles out of black paper, which is one of several methods of creating profiles.

Mrs. Pyburg was the first of many ladies who created profiles. She was an amateur, meaning she did not make her living from this practice. But following in her footsteps were a number of lady profilists in eighteenth-century England that made a career out of this art form. As you will see, although in the minority, they each displayed a great artistry, and their work holds up against any of the men who practiced this popular art.

Mrs. Beetham (and Edward)

The first, and most prolific, of these women was Mrs. Isabella Beetham. She was born in 1744 (some sources say 1750), and in 1764 (some sources say 1770) she ran away from home and shortly thereafter married Edward Beetham, an itinerant actor - the legal description of an actor at the time was “rogue and vagabond.” Both Isabella and Edward were from wealthy families, but received no financial assistance because of the families’ disapproval of the elopement. In her hard times, Isabella found that she had a talent for cutting paper profiles. After practicing this form of portraiture for a



Jane Read: Portrait painted on glass of Mrs. Fitzherbert. Maria Fitzherbert was a widow who married George, Prince of Wales (later King George IV). The marriage was never officially recognized because of the Royal Marriages Act of 1772, not to mention that she was Roman Catholic. Note Jane Read’s extensive use of sepia in the silhouette, and the way the raised (probably convex) glass throws another shadow or silhouette onto the white background. The precise detail of the spinning wheel and the elegance of the work are typical of Jane Read’s artistry.



Isabella Beetham: Portrait of Sarah Anne East, aged 15, painted on card. The delineation of the details of the clothing is typical of Mrs. Beetham's work.

while, she began studies with John Smart, a successful miniature portrait artist in London. As a result of her training with Smart, she began painting, rather than cutting, silhouettes, which was a far more complicated process. Mrs. Beetham became a master of detail. She painted both on glass and on a flat white background, probably some sort of plaster. Her trade labels indicated that she also painted profiles to be used in jewelry.

Edward, her husband, continued acting, and went on to invent a tumbler or roll-up curtain which was weighted at the bottom and was primarily used to help prevent fires that were often caused by on-stage candlelight. Because Beetham couldn't afford to take out a patent, he made little or no money from his invention. Ironically, it is an invention that is still used today in many small theaters. He then invented a "Patent Mangle with Rollers." This was a washing machine with wooden rollers to wring the excess water out of the garments. Previous machines had mangles made of stone. The invention was a huge success, to the point that Edward bought a lease at 26 & 27 Fleet Street, London, and used the lower floors to sell his mangles. Isabella had the use of the upper floors to create her silhouettes.

Edward was his wife's main supporter. He even travelled to Murano, Italy to learn a new technique for gilding glass, which he then produced for some of his wife's work.

Sometime after 1774, Isabella decided to create a trade label to put on the back of her work. It read, in part, as follows:

By application leagued with Good Natural Gifts
 Mrs. Beetham has enabled herself to remedy a Difficulty
 Much lamented and Universally Experienced by
 PARENTS, LOVERS AND FRIENDS.
 The former, assisted by her Art may see their Offspring
 In any part of the Terraqueous Globe;

Nor can Death obliterate the features from their fond Remembrance.

LOVERS the Poets have advanced, 'Can waft a sigh from Indus to the Pole.'

She will gratify them with more substantial though Ideal Intercourse by placing the Beloved Object to their View.

FRIENDSHIP is truly valuable was ever held a Maxim.

They who deny it have never tasted its Delicious Fruit or shed a sympathizing tear

--That was so ENDEARING, nay, RAVISHING—

(indecipherable)

MRS. BEETHAM will call into Being—

Portions of the label are generally missing; the verbiage on the label far exceeded the size of the small portraits, and the framers cut the labels to size with no regard for the artist's poetic descriptions. But the idea is clear; the silhouette as a remembrance of a lost or absent loved one was a desirable and widely accepted form of portraiture.

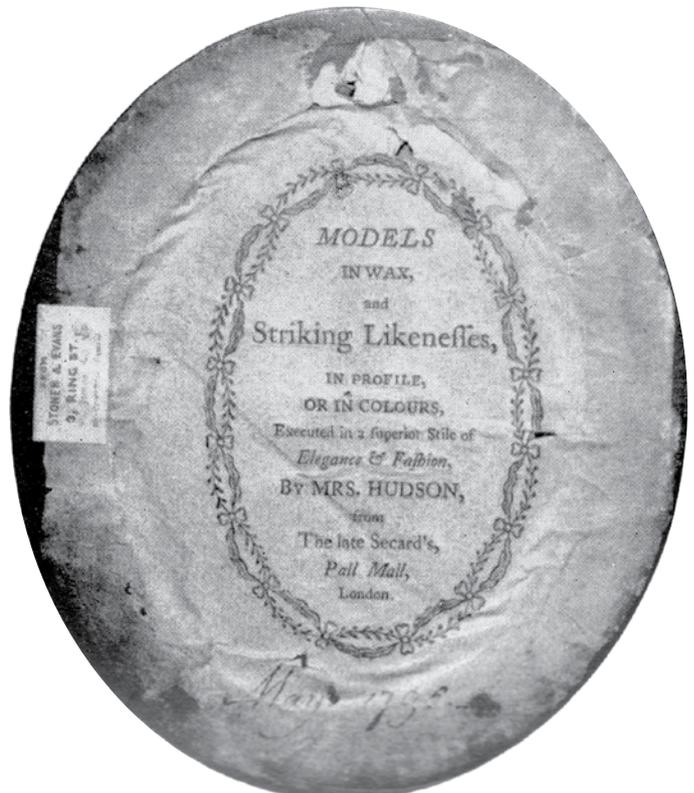
An advertisement, published in 1792, read:

PROFILES

Mrs. BEETHAM, who has ever been distinguished as one of the most eminent who ever attempted PROFILE LIKENESSES, continues to execute them with that Taste and Elegance which remains unrivalled. She paints them on Chrystals, ornamented with gold and silver, displaying the hair and drapery in a manner more beautiful than can be conceived till seen: and if not the most striking likeness, no gratuity will be expected. She likewise finishes them on IVORY, COMPOSITION, AND PAPER, for RINGS, LOCKETS, BRACELETS, &c.

Time of Sitting, One Minute

Specimens to be seen at her house, no. 27, Fleet Street.



Mrs. Hudson's Label: Models IN WAX, and Striking Likenesses, In Profile OR IN COLOURS, Executed in a superior Stile of Elegance & Fashion, By MRS. HUDSON, from the late Secard's, Pall Mall, London. (Secard's was an elegant gallery at the site; it later became the Royal Academy.)



Mrs. Harrington: Portrait of the Duchess of Newcastle. This silhouette was cut using Mrs. Harrington's patent machine and is a hollowcut. It is not as fine as the hand-painted profiles by her colleagues, and lacks detail.

In the early 1790s, the Beetham's oldest daughter, Jane, began working with her mother, and continued to do so until her marriage in 1797. A label from that period noted that "Mrs. And Miss BEETHAM" were creating "PROFILE LIKENESSES."

Jane Read (née Beetham)

Miss Jane Beetham, later Jane Read, was born in 1773, and was the second child of the Beethams. When she was a pre-teen, she showed artistic talent and began assisting her mother with her profiles. When she was about 20, she exhibited some of her work at the Royal Academy in London. She took painting lessons from John Opie, a prolific and excellent painter of miniature portraits (not profiles). Jane's portraits were mainly profiles, but she often delineated the facial features, and placed her subjects against a naturalistic background of trees or other foliage. She worked until around 1815 or 1816, although she lived into the 1850s. It is likely that her husband, John Read, a lawyer, became successful to the point that his wife no longer had to work.

Jane displayed her work at the Royal Academy under several names: Miss J. Beetham, Miss J. Betham (she dropped one "e" from the spelling of her name, going back to an original family spelling) and Mrs. Jane Read. She exhibited there between 1794 and 1816.

Jane Read's work is similar to her mother's in that she was a master of detail, but in many ways she exceeded her mother's work because of the addition of facial details and background.

Mrs. Harrington

Sarah Harrington began her career by publishing a book in 1772 called *New and Elegant Amusements for the Ladies of Great Britain*. Its author was "A Lady." Dedicating the book to the second daughter of George II, the Princess Amelia, indicates the author's intention of improving the general knowledge of the females of Britain, and thus "the whole nation." She goes on to say that having knowledge increases happiness, and "to enlarge those minds, to occasion an innate love of Virtue and Knowledge must be to increase human felicity." The "Amusements" were divided into two sections: *Rational Amusements* included the use of the Globes, Geography and Maps, Astronomy, Reading, Epistolary Correspondence or Letter Writing, Poetry, Music and Drawing. *Entertaining Amusements* were Dancing, Theatrical Entertainments, Singing, etc. Her emphasis in this book was on geography and maps, and she advertised that she could teach these subjects to young ladies.

It is not known exactly when Mrs. Harrington began cutting silhouettes, but we do know that many of her silhouettes were hollow-cut (the white paper cut out and placed over a black background). This was the simplest form of creating a profile, because the commercially produced black paper of the eighteenth-century was rough, probably the consistency of fine sandpaper, and so was difficult to cut precisely. Artists who cut out of black paper generally used white paper which they blackened themselves, often with India ink.

Mrs. Harrington applied for a patent in 1775 for a method of tracing and cutting profiles. According to Arthur Mayne in *British Profile Miniaturists*, it was "a sort of *camera obscura* in which the rays of the sun were allowed to enter through an aperture to cast a shadow. When the sun was not available artificial illumination took its place." In her patent application, she mentions that it will



Isabella Beetham: Portrait painted on glass of an unknown subject. Again, the details and subtle shading of Mrs. Beetham's work is sublime.

perfectly draw profiles of people, as well as furniture, buildings, the details of rooms, etc. The elements of the composition were taken separately, and then put together into the finished work with the aid of a pantograph (a mechanical drawing device that produced a miniaturized version of an original). She states that she could then either cut with scissors or color with India ink. She also advertised that she painted on silk, although to our knowledge, none of her work on silk has surfaced.

Sarah Harrington travelled extensively throughout England, and seemed to be popular at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford in 1775 and 1776, where, according to one of her advertisements, she had cut profiles of “the whole of the University of Cambridge,” which would have been upwards of 200 silhouettes.

Mrs. Collins

Mrs. Collins (her first name is unknown) was associated with Mrs. Harrington for a short time. She purchased a portion of Harrington’s patent, and struck out on her own in 1777. Like her former partner, Mrs. Collins traveled around the country and set up shop in various towns. One advertisement mentions Coventry, Warwick, Wolverhampton, Lichfield and Derby. It is also known that she was in Leicester, Birmingham, Bristol and Bath. She specifically mentioned her proficiency in making silhouettes of children. Her earliest advertisements mention cut-work, and we know she was making use of Mrs. Harrington’s patent machine, but later on she describes her work as “highly finished as the most elegant mezzotinto.” This suggests painted, rather than cut work.

Her 1777 notice in the Leicester Journal has an interesting twist: *ladies and Gentlemen need not have their heads dressed for sitting, as they may be convinced from the Specimens, that Mrs. COLLINS can decorate them in whatever taste or manner they shall choose, without their giving themselves that trouble.* She also notes in the same advertisement that if the sitter is not pleased with the resulting profile, he or she need not feel obliged to pay.

Mrs. Hudson

Mrs. Hudson, born Elizabeth Chilcot, was the daughter of a jeweler in Bath. Although no definite christening records can be found for her, it is assumed she was born around 1750. In 1776 her father referred to Elizabeth in an advertisement, where he said *Hair work by Miss Chilcot, in all extensive forms, fancies & devices, likenesses, ciphers, urns, altars, trees, &c. Emblematic devices for mourning, love & Friendship, of rings, lockets, bracelets, buttons, snuffboxes, &c.* Evidently she was not producing silhouettes at this time. Again in 1789 an advertisement appeared in Birmingham, which only mentioned her hairwork. However, by 1795 she advertised that she produced *the most perfect LIKENESSES in Miniature Profile...Profiles in Lockets, Bracelets &c.....superior to any Thing of the Kind ever yet attempted, and will last for Ages..... Time of Sitting one Minute only.* The ad continues to say that she also does portraits in wax, as well as portraits on ivory “in Colours.” She will make house calls if there are at least three or more customers, and she ends with “N.B. Profiles altered and



Portrait on glass by Mrs. Hudson.

dressed in the present Taste.” One wonders if this means she takes older out-of-fashion silhouettes and modernizes them, or if she dresses her subjects up in the manner of Mrs. Collins. She, like several of her feminine colleagues, travelled, and was known to be in Birmingham, Coventry, Oxford, Worcester and Buxton.

There is a lack of solid information about Mrs. Hudson aside from a few exemplary profiles and the advertisements from newspapers, and it is surmised by McKechnie that she painted profiles for seven years and after that worked only in wax.

Silhouettes of ladies by ladies can make a fascinating and focused collection. For more information on these and other silhouette artists, the “Bible” is *British Silhouette Artists and their Work 1760-1860* by Sue McKechnie (Sotheby Park Bernet, 1978). There are other books, including those by Mrs. Neville Jackson, Arthur Mayne and Desmond Coke, but most of the information by the latter authors is consolidated in McKechnie’s book.

Joy Ruskin Hanes and Lee Hanes are full time professional third generation antiques dealers. Presently located in Old Lyme, Conn., Hanes & Ruskin Antiques specialize in 18th and early 19th-Century American high-style country furniture and appropriate period accessories. They live in an antique house and are open year round by appointment. For more information visit www.hanesandrskin.com.