

Introduction

Considering how America's spatial and social boundaries were continuously being drawn, erased, and redrawn between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, as the young country cut its ties with England and tested its ideals as a new nation, as it both slowly expanded with the Louisiana Purchase and Manifest Destiny and contracted with mounting regional divisions over slavery, as towns and rivers were named and renamed, as enslaved bodies were shipped in and natives were forced out, as new histories were forged and previous ones forgotten, as financial panics and banking systems swelled and dissipated, and as time and distance collapsed with the railroad and telegraph, it is rather strange that the new citizens of this emerging nation turned to the obscure art form of the silhouette—profiled portraits cut from paper—when deciding how to be imaged. Indeed, during this time, hundreds of thousands of Americans hung silhouettes on their parlor walls or pasted them into scrapbooks as family mementos. Of course, because they were far more affordable than oil paintings, and were made quickly, and in multiples, silhouettes were bound to be hugely popular and certainly democratized portraiture well before the advent of photography in 1839.

But beyond such practical reasons, the question remains why the art of silhouettes captured the imaginations of broad swaths of American people when so

much—so many issues about national identity, selfhood, and equality—hung in the balance. More fundamentally, how did an art form that rendered everyone *pitch black* flourish, particularly at a time when the very concept of “blackness” was being contested as an alleged marker of inferiority or property far and wide—on ships, across oceans, on plantations, and at public lecterns? And, more recently, why is it that silhouettes have remained such an important form of expression to this day? *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now* considers these questions while exploring silhouettes in terms of their deep historical roots and powerful contemporary presence. Its scope is part biography and material culture, in terms of the National Portrait Gallery's extensive collection and the many significant objects lent by other institutions, and part contemporary art, in terms of the bold, imaginative ways artists are conceptualizing silhouettes today.

As this suggests, *Black Out* will not adhere to traditional art historical frameworks. Part of this is due to the fact that the history of silhouettes has received scant scholarly attention in the first place. Until now, silhouettes have been positioned in the art world as craftwork and antique collectibles. As Emily Jackson wrote in her 1911 publication *The History of the Silhouette*, “At its best, black profile portraiture is a thing of real beauty,

almost worthy to take its place with the best miniature painting; at its worst, it is a quaintly appealing handicraft, revealing the fashions and foibles, the intimate domestic life and conventions of its day.”¹ Marked with such phrases as “almost worthy,” Jackson’s description is telling, both as an attempt to promote silhouettes *almost* to the level of miniature painting and as a way to demote the worst renditions as handicraft.

Not surprisingly, the majority of the publications on the art form are predicated on one of these two strands of thought.² The notable exceptions that examine silhouettes in a trenchant historical or art historical context are Andrew Oliver’s 1977 catalogue for the National Portrait Gallery’s collection of silhouettes by Auguste Edouart, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw’s study of contemporary artist Kara Walker and nineteenth-century silhouettist Moses Williams, Wendy Bellion’s essay on the direct relationship between silhouettes and democracy, and Anne Verplanck’s scholarship on nineteenth-century Pennsylvania Quaker silhouettes.³ With the exception of Shaw’s writing, there has been little analysis of why silhouettes retain such currency in our cultural landscape today. Thus, the aims of this catalogue are twofold: to investigate the historical underpinnings of silhouettes and to present the work of four living artists—Kristi Malakoff, Camille Utterback, Kara Walker, and Kumi Yamashita—in juxtaposition with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art that each deconstructs.

Admittedly, much of this volume will linger in the past, with the hopes that scholars will further unravel the entangled threads between the historical and contemporary work discussed in the pages that follow. My essay argues that historical silhouettes were in certain ways the perfect aesthetic vehicle for a country roiling 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. As I argue, contemporary artists continue to manipulate these paradoxes.

In the next two essays, Alexander Nemerov and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw each probe the ontological and cultural contours of the remarkable worlds of unconventional nineteenth-century silhouettists Martha Ann Honeywell and Moses Williams, respectively. Nemerov connects Honeywell and her ability to make minuscule cuttings to nineteenth-century ideas on the divine cosmos and the search for self-discovery by her contemporary Margaret Fuller. Looking at identity through a different lens, Shaw explores how the same racializing hierarchies that permitted Williams to be a silhouette cutter inflected the profile imaging of Native American delegations visiting Thomas Jefferson in the early 1800s. In the final essay, conservator Penley Knipe carefully examines silhouettes from the inside out, revealing various aspects of their material composition that many readers will find surprising.

Ultimately, the earlier objects in this volume point to the historical complexities of the diverse fabric of our country and pry open the previously shuttered lives of early American citizens; many who, like Flora, a nineteen-year-old enslaved woman, or Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant, a same-sex couple, would otherwise be overlooked in normative hierarchies of power and wealth but for their likeness being captured in silhouette. The later objects reveal how four contemporary artists appropriate the silhouette tradition to create works that, much like their historical counterparts, put pressure on conceptualizations of identity, social relations, and portraiture as cultural document. Not only does this volume deepen our understanding of how Americans—women, men, black, white, statesmen, laborers—wanted to see themselves in the years of the Early Republic, but it also opens new interpretative pathways between our past and present in terms of how period notions of individualism, race, and power, and even our digital selves, can be critiqued through the medium of portraiture.

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**Lines from “To Lord Viscount Forbes,
from the City of Washington”**

**If former times had never left a trace,
Of human frailty and their shadowy race,
Even here, beside the proud Potomac’s stream,
Who can, with patience for a moment see
The medley mass of pride and misery,
Of whips and charters, manacles and rights,
Of slaving blacks and democratic whites**

Thomas Moore, ca. 1803–4