



Collecting SILHOUETTES

Small, often beautifully framed and with an air of mystery, silhouettes are an intriguing field for collectors, and look striking placed together on a wall

FEATURE EMMA LONGSTAFF

'Silhouettes are an ancient art form, just as powerful today as thousands of years ago,' says David Vyvyan Robinson, a picture specialist at the auction house Bearnès, Hampton and Littlewood. 'Ancient Greek pottery featured black figures in profile, and in the modern world, road signs still often use silhouettes. They're a bold, uncomplicated form of

imagery.' The peak of silhouette portrait production was in the late-18th and early-19th centuries. Whether cut from paper or, more rarely, painted onto glass, ivory or plaster, artists' methods for creating the image were largely the same, David explains: 'The sitter posed by a large sheet of paper, their shadow cast by candlelight. Meanwhile, the artist drew their outline. This was then ►

Silhouettes were cut from paper or painted with materials like ink, and even soot. In the 19th century, 'bronzing' and other highlights, as shown in this example sold by Bearnès, Hampton and Littlewood, helped animate the portrait.



Ian Jackson / BH&I; Bearnes, Hampton and Littlewood; © John Speight

reduced using a pantograph – a zigzag-shaped instrument used for scaling images – and a miniature version produced. It must have been very exciting to watch – art as entertainment.’

Scores of silhouette-makers set up business in fashionable parts of London like the Strand, as well as spa towns such as Bath. Technical innovations could help give them a competitive edge. John Miers, one of the most prolific silhouettists of the late-18th century, specialised in painting onto plaster, using soot mixed with

Until the 19th century, what we now know as a silhouette went by a different name – a ‘black shade’ or ‘profile’

beer to create delicate, gauzy portrayals of sitters’ hair, lace caps and bonnets. Isabella Beetham, with premises close to Miers, painted onto the reverse of convex glass, dabbing her fingers into sticky enamel paint to recreate ladies’ delicate muslin dresses. Other artists highlighted their portraits with bronzing (powdered gold mixed with gum), or added detail with white paint.

Until the 19th century, however, what we now know as a silhouette went by a completely different name – a ‘black shade’ or ‘profile’. The term silhouette was imported from France. Bizarrely, it comes from a French finance minister who briefly served King Louis XV. Theories abound as to how his name became associated with the art form. In 1760, Étienne de

Silhouette imposed heavy taxes to fund the King’s ambitious military campaigns. De Silhouette’s taxes were deeply unpopular with the French people, and his name became synonymous with anything cheap, austere, or penny-pinching. Possibly the connection was made because the black profile portraits were a much more affordable alternative to a miniature, hand-painted on ivory.

Silhouette lasted in the job for less than a year before he was sacked. Some draw parallels between his short tenure and the few minutes it took to sit for a silhouette, and claim this is why the name stuck. Others say that Monsieur de Silhouette was a paper-cutting fanatic, insisting visitors to his home posed for their cut-out portrait and decking the walls, floor to ceiling, with his amateur artworks.

Over the years, many of the glass, plaster and ivory examples have been damaged, while paper silhouettes are susceptible to water and mould. So, to have an 18th- or early-19th- century example in good condition, especially if it ▶

Silhouettes by the seaside

The rise and rise of Brighton

Brighton has a rich tradition of silhouette-making, explains Anabella Pollen, Professor of Visual and Material Culture at the University of Brighton: ‘When the Prince Regent made Brighton his party destination and built the Royal Pavilion, the town became a place where the wealthy wanted to be seen. New buildings were erected, and local services and sites for visitors grew. This included the establishment of the Chain Pier in 1823 – its towers contained kiosks housing silhouette artists from the very start. Newspapers and other sources show around a dozen silhouette artists in operation, either on the pier or in the main tourist parts of town

near the seafront in the 1820s and 1830s. This was the peak in production, however, silhouette art is generally perceived to have gone into decline in quality from the 1820s, becoming reduced to a cheap tourist novelty. By the late-1830s, with the arrival of photography, silhouettes were in decline, but they enjoyed a revival in the 1920s when they seemed to represent something more meaningful and handmade than a photograph.’

Continuing the story, John Speight tells us about his grandfather’s silhouette studio on the pier: ‘My grandfather, Arthur Forrester, started cutting silhouettes in the 1920s and ran a studio on Brighton Palace

Pier in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a child, I watched the way he made the silhouettes. He did this entirely by eye, cutting them with a large pair of vining scissors – the kind you’d use for pruning a Bonsai tree – and the paper he used was printed black on one side. He’d start by folding the paper neatly in half with the black side facing inwards, as looking at the white side was easier. The customer sat sideways, facing a lightbox, and would hopefully keep still for the minute or so he needed to cut the silhouette – he was a fast worker. The portraits could be purchased two for a shilling, or at extra cost be mounted, tinted with gold, and framed. He claimed to have



ABOVE John (on the right) in front of his grandfather’s studio on Brighton Palace Pier, 1966.

cut over one million profiles which, if accurate, would mean he was making at least 627 every week of his career. I’m the third generation of paper-cutters and am pleased to be carrying on the family tradition – although I live in Northumberland and my focus tends to be on trees, rather than people’.



is by a collectable artist, means it will perform better at auction, says Pola Durajska, who works with David at Bearnes, Hampton and Littlewood. ‘You can spend anything between £20 and £2,000 on a silhouette today,’ she notes.

‘In January 2024 we sold a single-owner collection of silhouettes. One of the star lots was by the French artist, Augustin Edouart, who was active in Britain in the early-19th century and became one of the most important silhouette artists.’ It was an early example of his work – an attractive full-length silhouette of a famous geologist, Adam Sedgwick, shown in his study with a table of rocks and fossils. Edouart kept

duplicates of all his silhouettes, and the one of Professor Sedgwick is with the National Portrait Gallery. ‘The subject, the setting, and the attribution to a well-known artist helped it achieve £700,’ says Pola.

For serious collectors of silhouettes, it’s often the work of a particular artist that drives them. ‘If a silhouette isn’t signed and dated, the trade labels on the back can give a lot of information about the maker,’ says Pola. ‘The names of the sitters are sometimes also included, which some buyers like, especially if they enjoy researching family history.’

Other buyers simply love the aesthetic they can achieve with

silhouettes. ‘Between silhouettes, there’s a certain uniformity, Pola continues. ‘They’re also quite small, often nicely framed, and they look really striking displayed together en masse. You can achieve a really interesting effect in a room, almost like wallpaper.’

WHERE TO BUY

Bearnes, Hampton and Littlewood
bhandl.co.uk

Wigs on the Green
wigsongthegreen.co.uk

John Speight
johnspeight.co.uk

WHERE TO SEE

The Regency Townhouse
 in Brighton holds a collection of over 1,500 silhouettes
rth.org.uk

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Three (of six) Newbold family ink silhouettes, some with highlights, 1828; Edgard Adolphe bronzed profile of Miss E. Rowe, c1832–1846; late-18th-century female bust silhouette painted on plaster; paper-cut of Rev Charles Simeon; Professor Adam Sedgwick in his study by Augustin Edouart, 1828, full-length paper-cut silhouette and ink wash with heightening in gouache. All *Bearnes, Hampton & Littlewood*.