



Linore Rose Burkard

*Inspirational Romance
for the Jane Austen Soul*



The Rise of the Silhouette in Regency England

Before the age of photography, only the wealthy could afford to commission artists for paintings of themselves or their loved ones. In fact, the high cost of hiring an artist, as well as the requirement of long and tedious sittings for portraiture meant that most people would never be painted. The privilege was beyond their means. Even with the rise in popularity of portrait miniatures, which significantly lowered the cost, the largest part of British society was still unable to afford such art.



Jane Austen's Silhouette

Enter the ***silhouette***. The silhouette is notable, because it was accessible for nearly anyone of any class, yet still attracted the wealthy. So what exactly was a silhouette? And, how were they made?

The silhouette was an outline drawing of a person, usually in profile, and filled in with solid shadow. Its name comes from "*Etienne de Silhouette*," a French controller general of finance who lived from 1709 to 1767. He was a notorious cheapskate, so that his name became synonymous with anything done or made cheaply, such as silhouettes. He even decorated a new house entirely by cutting out little silhouettes from black paper in order to save money!

The popularity of the silhouette was indeed in part because it was inexpensive. Plus, it could be quickly produced, and was a delightful form of art in its own right.

There were several types of silhouettes, but the most common were cut from black paper with scissors. They could also be called "paper cuttings," "shadows", or in England, "shades." Once the black shape was finished, the paper was glued to a white or light background card.

Over time, the silhouette made its way to America. For example, you could get one made in minutes on the street in Philadelphia for a penny. Their size resembled a small photograph. But, once the *daguerreotype* was invented, the silhouette quickly decreased in popularity.

However, during the 18th century (Georgian England) and into the early 19th century (the Regency), silhouettes were still the rage. In the courts of France and Germany, they even replaced the miniature portrait.



Silhouette of Benjamin Franklin

Miniatures were popular among dignitaries as diplomatic tools. And, for those who could afford them, they served as personal tokens. The silhouette, by contrast, made portable likenesses of loved ones affordable for nearly anyone. Some even used them as wall decorations. All you needed was a person capable of creating them (a “profile portraitist”) and a few pence.

In time, their popularity swung right back to the rich who commissioned silhouettes to be painted and encrusted with precious stones in jewelry and snuff boxes. Royalty commissioned porcelain dinner services with silhouettes. Common folk filled albums with silhouettes of family and friends.



**J.H. Gillespie,
“Profile of an English Lady”**

This style of art was so popular it even became a parlour game called “Shades.” Almost anyone could try their hand at the art. The finished works may not have been masterpieces, but making them was a merry way to pass the time. (By contrast, the game called “Shadows” was played by making shadow-images on the walls using the hands. Nothing was drawn or taken away except a few laughs.)

The Concise Britannica states that silhouettes were done “by drawing the outline cast by candlelight or lamplight.” However, “once photography rendered silhouettes nearly obsolete, they became a type of folk art practiced by itinerant artists and caricaturists.”

History also reveals that Auguste Edouart, a Frenchman, used to cut full-length silhouettes. Another itinerant was the American boy silhouettist, Master Hubbard, who could cut profiles in 20 seconds!

The silhouette above, “Profile of an English Lady,” is an example of an embellished silhouette. This would have cost fifty cents at time of execution, circa 1815.

Another great example of a beautiful silhouette is that of Cassandra Austen, Jane’s beloved sister. Notice the lighter detailing. This silhouette was reduced using an instrument known as a “pantograph.” The reduced image was then painted with soot, or lamp black, on plaster or glass.



**Silhouette of
Cassandra Austen**

Artists would paint the face dead black, then the hair, hats, ribbons, frills, and other details of a costume would be “dragged out.” This process involved using a fine brush with progressively more and more diluted pigment. According to one expert, silhouettes of the past were usually completed using one of the following formats:

- Painted on paper, card, vellum, ivory, silk, or porcelain;
- Painted in reverse on glass;
- Hollow cut with the aid of a machine or, very rarely, by hand.

In the “hollow cut” process, the figure is cut away from the paper, which leaves a negative image. Then, the paper outline is backed with a contrasting color of paper or fabric. Or, it could be cut freehand with scissors and pasted to a contrasting (usually light-colored) background. ”

In England, from the late 18th and early 19th century, famous silhouette artists included John Miers (1756 -1821) and John Field. In addition, JC Lavater, was a German who dabbled in science and used a machine to make what he called “scientific” silhouettes, which probably meant “accurate.”

The Regency was a significant period for silhouette art. But, you can still enjoy it today. Many online auction sites will often list some of these historical items for purchase.



At left: The lady sitting down is having her silhouette drawn (“Shades”). The children at the left corner are playing the game of “Shadows.”

Links of Interest:

How to Cut a Silhouette

<http://pariscoutureantiques.blogspot.com/2008/02/art-of-silhouette-cutting.html>

A Modern Day Silhouette Artist Keeps the Art Alive

<http://www.arunet.co.uk/tkboyd/tk1mp2.htm>



Linore Rose Burkard writes *Inspirational Romance for the Jane Austen Soul*. Her characters take you back in time to experience life and love during the Regency England era (circa 1800 – 1830). Ms. Burkard’s novels include *Before the Season Ends* and *The House in Grosvenor Square* (coming April, 2009). Her stories blend Christian faith and romance with well-researched details from the Regency period. Experience a romantic age, where timeless lessons still apply to modern life. And, enjoy a romance that reminds you happy endings are possible for everyone.

For more information, visit: www.LinoreRoseBurkard.com

