

The Silhouette- In Georgian and Regency England

By *Linore Rose Burkard*

Before the age of photography, it was mostly only the wealthy who could afford to

commission artists for paintings of themselves or their loved ones. The portrait miniature eventually became popular precisely because it made the privilege of being painted in portrait affordable for more people. The miniature cost much less than a full-sized portrait. But for most people, being painted even in miniature was still too expensive, and the process required long and tedious sittings.



Jane Austen's Silhouette

Enter the ***silhouette***. The silhouette is notable in that it was accessible for nearly anyone of any class but 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 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, in addition to which he decorated a new house entirely (to save money) by cutting out little silhouettes from black paper.

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

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

The silhouette was also popular in America, where you could have one made on the street, such as in Philadelphia, for a penny, and within minutes. In size, they resembled a small photograph, and once the *daguerreotype* was invented, the silhouette quickly decreased in popularity.

[right: Silhouette of Benjamin Franklin]



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During the last decades of the eighteenth century (Georgian England) and into the early nineteenth, (the Regency) however, silhouettes were still the rage. In the courts of France and Germany, they even replaced the miniature portrait. The miniatures, as I explain in a different article, were popular among dignitaries as diplomatic tools, and among all who could afford them, as personal tokens. The silhouette, by contrast, made portable likenesses of loved ones affordable for nearly anyone, and could even be used 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 towards 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."



Left: J.H. Gillespie, "Profile of An English Lady"

In addition, making silhouettes was a popular parlor game called "[Shades.](#)" Almost anyone could try their hand at the art. The finished pieces may not have been works of art, but the making of them was surely a merry way to pass the time. (The game called "Shadows," by contrast, was when one made shadow-images on the walls using mostly the hands; nothing was drawn or taken away from the exercise except a few laughs.)

The Concise Britannica states that silhouettes were done "by drawing the outline cast by candlelight or lamplight," which is surely how the average person did it. However, "once photography rendered silhouettes nearly obsolete, they became a type of folk art practiced by itinerant artists and caricaturists."

Auguste Edouart, a Frenchman, cut *full-length* silhouettes. Another itinerant was the American boy silhouettist Master Hubbard, who cut profiles in 20 seconds.

A beautiful example of a silhouette is one we have of Cassandra Austen, Jane's beloved sister. (See below) Notice the lighter detailing. This was done by virtue of the fact that one's "shade" could be reduced ("using a reducing instrument known as a pantograph") then painted using "soot, or lampblack, on plaster or glass. After painting the face dead black, the hair, hats, ribbons, frills, or other details of costume would have been 'dragged' out, using a fine brush, with progressively more and more diluted pigment." In the silhouette above, "Profile of an English Lady" we have another example of an embellished silhouette. This would have cost fifty cents at the time of execution, ca.1815.



According to one website, the silhouette of the past would likely have been done in any of the following four 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 this process, the figure is cut away from the paper thereby leaving a negative image. The paper outline is then backed with a contrasting color of paper or fabric; Or cut freehand with scissors or a sharp edge

and then pasted to a contrasting (usually light-colored) background. ”

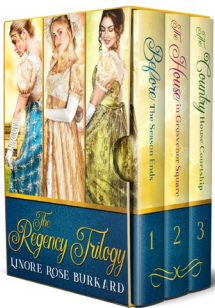
In England, from the late 18th into the early 19th century, (**the stylistic Regency**, in other words) a famous silhouette artist was John Miers (1756-1821). Preceding him was John Field. JC Lavater, a German who dabbled in science, used a machine to make what he called “scientific” silhouettes. (“Scientific” most likely means “accurate”.)



There was evidently a good deal of interest in the art, and even a cursory perusal of auction sites often turn up a silhouette or two from days gone by. The one pictured below I found at a yard sale for fifty cents!

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

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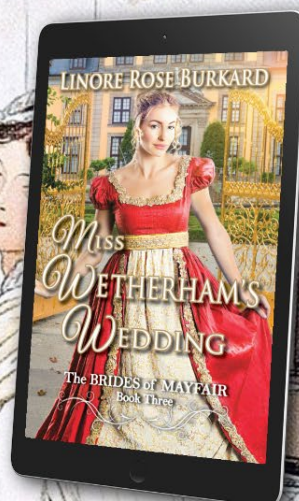
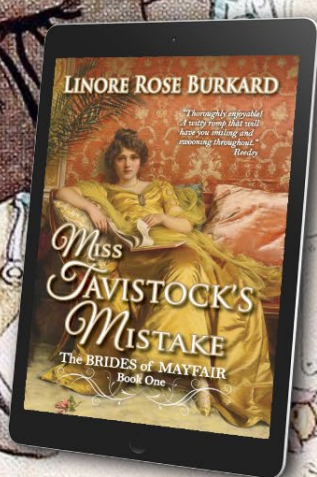
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Two touched-up silhouettes with details highlighted in gold leaf or paint.



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