At fairs and festivals across America we can often find a silhouette artist cutting profiles of squirming children while their indulgent parents or grandparents look on. These silhouettes sell for anywhere from $20 to $30, unless you want two (one for the parents, one for the grandparents) in which case the cost is about $10 more. The artists who do this work today generally cut the silhouettes freehand, looking at their subject in profile. If you have ever had this done, you know how quickly a good artist can execute one of these portraits, and you walk away quite satisfied that your child will be preserved in black paper forever.
There is not a lot of difference between what happens at these fairs today, and the method of silhouette artists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These itinerant artists moved from town to town and city to city in search of subjects. In both England and America, silhouette artists would enter a new town and quickly begin advertising their location. If they had cut profiles of any royalty, that would of course, be included in their promotions, as well as the speed with which they could produce the finished product (usually a couple of minutes or less). In England, artists visited the fashionable resorts on the coast and in Bath, as well as major cities.

**The Art of the Silhouette**

The word silhouette appears to have come from Etienne de Silhouette, the French minister of finance in 1757, who made so many cuts to the state budget that anything done inexpensively was referred to as "à la silhouette." Some believe that he actually cut silhouettes as a hobby. This makes a good story, but no one can confirm or deny it, so we cite it only as hearsay.

The popularity of silhouettes rose in the late eighteenth century. They were a cheap and fast means of producing a portrait (the only other form of portraiture in a small size at that time was the expensive portrait miniature, usually painted on ivory with watercolors, which was a detailed and time-consuming art, requiring multiple sittings). Many of the earliest silhouette artists were also portrait miniature painters. One can imagine that, as the popularity of "shades" (as they were then called) increased, the artist would offer his subjects a choice between the two types of portrait. Some proponents of the silhouette thought that the character of the sitter could be represented more accurately when the full features were not delineated.

Some silhouette artists devised mechanical means of casting a person's shadow onto a screen and cutting or drawing the portrait from that. Others thought that the character of the sitter could be more accurately represented when the full features were not delineated.

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There are three methods of creating a silhouette. The first, which some people think is the only one, involves cutting the profile from black paper and mounting it on a white background. It appears that the artists had to prepare their own black paper, as there is no evidence of any of the stationers or other artists' suppliers selling it. If you can ever take a peek at the back of an early silhouette, you will see that the back is white. Researchers are not sure if there was a standard preparation or if each artist had his own recipe for the black coating. Some artists may have coated the paper after the silhouette was cut, while others may have pre-coated it to save time.

The second method is called "hollow cut" which produces a silhouette as a space cut into white paper. The outer section is then placed upon a dark background, usually of fabric. Hollow cuts were primarily done in America. Occasionally one can find the white "inside" of the hollow cut mounted on black paper, thus producing a reverse copy of the original.

The third method is by painting. We have spoken to collectors who don't think that painted silhouettes are technically the real thing, but we assure them that they are! Silhouettes were painted on paper, on glass, on plaster, and on ivory. Silhouettes were often enhanced with either gold (called bronzing) or white, and in some cases color was added as well. The practice of enhancement didn't become widespread until the 1840s, when photography was coming into popularity and silhouettes found themselves in direct competition with this new form of fast and cheap portraiture. Early photography was, of course, limited to

"We should perhaps think of silhouettes as popular, rather than folk, art."
monochrome images. Conversation groups, which showed a group of people (most often a family) engaging in various activities in a room, were popular in the late eighteenth-century. Some of the eighteenth-century silhouette artists painted these conversation groups on glass; others painted them on card or paper. They would often depict an interior, with portraits on the walls, fireplaces and furniture, as well as favorite pets.

Three Collectible Artists

John Miers: One of the earliest

One of the best and most enterprising of silhouettists was John Miers. He was a landscape painter who also supplied artists with their materials. John Miers was born in Leeds, England, in 1758, and in 1781 opened his first shop in his home city. He advertised: “Profile Shades in Miniature; most striking likenesses drawn and neatly framed at 2/6 (two shillings and six pence) each. A second draught from the same shade 2s.” One of his earliest labels advertised that he had earned “the most flattering Encomiums, for giving the true Proportion and most animated Expression of the Features.” This label was used in Manchester in 1784.

Within two years, Miers had run out of possible customers in Leeds, and between 1783 and 1786 he toured and set up shop in Newcastle, Manchester, Liverpool and Edinburgh. He eventually moved to London, where he painted silhouettes until about 1800. Miers needed a sitting that lasted only two minutes. He would make the "likeness" (as he called it) any size desired, and would also paint silhouettes on ivory and mount them as pieces of jewelry. Apart from these special orders, he painted his silhouettes on plaster. Although the sittings were brief, Miers probably took an hour or more to paint in the details. He often smudged the paint to give a translucent quality to the details, such as lace or hair.

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Miers’ work in London became so popular that he eventually took in other artists. The most prominent of these was Henry William Field, who basically took over all of the silhouette painting. He began working with Miers in 1793, and by 1801 was the only artist working there. In 1823, William Miers (John’s son) and John Field (Henry William’s son) formed a partnership and continued painting profiles in the style of Miers. Their partnership dissolved six years later, as a result of property and business disputes. Miers died in 1821, leaving behind a fortune of £20,000, which, in today’s terms would be about $2,000,000 (according to the calculations of Brian Dolan, author of Wedgewood, the First Tycoon).

“Hubard: A Nineteenth-Century Prodigy

In the early nineteenth century, another silhouette artist-phenomenon came to light in the person of William James Hubard. He was born in 1809 in Whitchurch, Shropshire. The story goes that as a child he would amuse himself in church by cutting silhouettes of the parishioners. When he was 12 or 13, he acquired a man-