



Spot the Skipper – a History of Silhouettes

A silhouette or shadow portrait is produced by having a person turn side on (in profile) and their image or shadow is drawn or cut from paper. This produces a likeness through shape, without showing details of the face. Originally, they were called profile miniatures or shades, but were named silhouette after the French Minister for Finance Etienne de Silhouette (1709 – 1769). He was very miserly and cut black profiles as a hobby, so his name was used to reflect his cheapness!

Silhouette portraits were popular during the 18th century in Europe, as they were a cheap, quick method of producing a likeness. Photography was not in public use until about 1839 and sitting for painted portraiture (even miniatures) was expensive. Silhouette portraits were hung in oval frames in the sitting room or bedroom. Sometimes, whole scenes showing people against indoor or outdoor scenery were created. There was generally a silhouette artist in every large town, but in 1820, the quality of silhouettes is thought to have declined as more unskilled artists were working. Silhouettes and painted miniatures also declined in popularity with the invention of photography.

Silhouette portraits were produced by positioning the subject between a bright light (such as a candle) and a sheet of white drawing paper pinned against a wall. Their shadow was traced and cut out, then mounted and framed. Some silhouettes were drawn or cut from paper, wax, glass or plaster. Although silhouettes are normally plain, paint was sometimes used to decorate it. For example, the hair or dress was touched in gold or bronze paint, grey paint was used to emphasise folds of clothing or texture of hair.

Johann Casper Lavater (1741 – 1801) believed that character could be assessed from people's facial features. King George III was fond of the craft and regularly had his profile captured (although his profile was generally considered to be unattractive!)