

OUR PAST CASTS SHADOWS

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The silhouette portrait is the idealized representation of a person in the form of a profile likeness.¹ From its legendary beginning as the traced outline portrait of a departed lover, to its popularity in the 19th century as a memento, painted or cut from black paper, our understanding of the silhouette rests on the belief that a graphic object can reflect the virtue of an individual.² French born August Edouart (1789–1861), one of the most notable silhouette artists who worked in England, Scotland, and the United States, felt that the silhouette bust did not allow true character to emerge. Instead, he favoured a full body silhouette, in profile and cut out from black paper for its representational qualities.³ He would often encourage his sitters to move around freely after he had cut out their face; he was thus able to better capture their character. This echoes the belief held by Italian Renaissance artist, Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) that the movement of the subject is essential to capture the character of the person.⁴ Johann Kaspar Lavatar (1741-1801), a Swiss Protestant pastor, popularized a brand of physiognomy promoting a moral reading of faces, and insisted that outward appearance reflected internal characteristics. This theory of physiognomy created a demand for accurate silhouettes. In response, industrious inventors created machines to meet this demand.⁵ Edouart, who believed that cutting silhouettes was true art, sought to distance himself from this mechanical reproduction by crafting full body shapes and conversation pieces—informal group portraits of people at leisure. Other artists in this period adopted a similar view and from the 1820s on, hand cut silhouettes became popular again.⁶ Portrait silhouettes were meant

for circulation and were often exchanged, collected, and pasted in albums.⁷ This was especially true for cut outs, as the artist could fold the paper multiple times to simultaneously produce copies of the same image.⁸ Since the silhouette form is inherently limited in visual qualities, details such as costume and accessories were often included to portray the individual. Large silhouettes, especially conversation pieces, included objects and possessions associated with a person's professional or personal interests to solidify the construction of their identity.⁹ When we look at the profile portraits in this collection, we face well-known early Canadians as they wished to be seen; and in the case of unknown subjects, we are left with a shadow figure of essential essence.

This is an excellent example of the conversation piece silhouette. It was cut by Auguste Edouart, the artist who also cut the portrait silhouette of Louis-Joseph-Amédée Papineau that follows.



William Buckland and his Wife and Son Frank, Examining Buckland's Natural History Collection, c. 1828-9.

Auguste Amant Constant Fidèle Edouart (France, 1789-1861),

Cut-out full-figure silhouettes from matte black coated white wove paper mounted to beige wove paper.

Mary L. Smith Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1966.964.



Silhouette portraits (members of the Brown family), 1820

Artist unknown

Library and Archives Canada R13199-10

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3962847>.

The young lady presented here is Harriet Amy Brown.¹⁰ In this case only her name and silhouette survives, and yet it is telling as a silhouette portrait because it reflects an identity performed for public viewing.¹¹ She is represented as a young lady in a dress appropriate to her social station. The white lace detailing, as well as the highlights in this work, capture the delicate nature of a young woman during the Victorian era. This, and the following are both painted silhouettes, a style popular until the 1820s, when the cut form became dominant.¹² A popular form of portraiture in this period, it was both affordable and quick to produce. Coupled with the small size of the portraits, this fact meant that silhouettes were collected by people from all social classes.



Silhouette portraits (members of the Brown family), 1820

Artist Unknown

Library and Archives Canada/ R13199-10

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3962847>.

The sitter of this silhouette is Mrs. Murton of Daheutry. Further details of her life have been lost to history, but we do know that she was the great-grandmother either to the artist, or to the collector of this portrait. We can discern from the props on the table aspects of Mrs. Murton's life that were important aspects of the construction of her identity. The white highlights in this and the other Brown family silhouette appear to be a type of handmade lace, and the tools on the table suggest that she may have created these pieces. Further, these embellishments are examples of the rococo flavour that is associated with painted silhouettes in the early 17th century.¹³ Later, the cut silhouette became the dominant form with the rise in popularity of neoclassicism. The following images are examples of this stylistic preference.¹⁴ With the cut silhouette, multiple copies could be produced at the same time, and this helped to increase the popularity of these works by allowing for wider distribution of a person's portrait.



Sir George R. Dalhousie, 1828

Jarvis Hanks, 1799-1852

cut silhouette in black paper with bronze details pasted on a mount with grey wash on the foreground on wove paper

Library and Archives Canada/A292-01

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2887790>.

Lord Dalhousie was Governor General of Canada from 1820- 1828, and this piece dates from the final years of his service.¹⁵ This silhouette was cut by Jarvis Hanks and is one of ten copies; five were gilded in bronze while the other five were plain black.¹⁶ This version was pasted onto the background that shows Quebec City, the seat of the Governor General at this time, indicating the official nature of this portrait. On his chest is a gilded star that represents the Order of Bath, an order of Knighthood in England. This gilded attribute further suggests that this piece functions as an official portrait, whereas the plain black versions are more personal and discrete, to be shared with family and friends.



Portrait of Louis-Joseph-Amédée Papineau, 1840

Auguste Edouart, 1788-1861

cut black paper and pencil on paper ; 23.6 x 19.3 cm

Library and Archives Canada/ 2880038

<http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2880038>.

Louis Joseph Amédée Papineau (1819-1903), a founding member of the Fils de la Liberté (Sons of Liberty), chose this silhouette as the frontispiece to the Appendix of his *Journal d'un Fils de la Liberté réfugié aux États-Unis par suite de L'Insurrection Canadienne en 1837*, which is about his experiences as an exile in the United States following the Lower Canada Rebellion of 1837. The imagery of this portrait is especially significant in relation to this man's role as a lawyer, seigneur, and politician who came to see himself as the defender of French Canada.¹⁷ Papineau is careful to show that he is at the forefront of contemporary fashion and etiquette. He writes: "Here I am, with my long hair, my coat, my rattan cane, and my hat—straw, because we are in summer. Following the custom of all famous, modern authors, it is very proper, necessary I might say, that my portrait and my signature are at the beginning of my works." At the same time, he encodes his image with a possibly subversive element: the dog. While animals are occasionally seen in Edouart's work, dogs are unusual in his adult portraiture.¹⁸ The dog is a greyhound or whippet, both hunting dogs, and as such is a reference to a later Patriote society, formed in exile, Les Frères Chasseurs (the hunter brothers).¹⁹ In addition to this connotation, animals were represented in portraiture as having specific human emotions.²⁰ In this case we can discern that the dog is loyal and attentive. Since Papineau followed his father, Louis-Joseph Papineau (1786 – 1871) into exile after the Lower Canada Rebellion of 1837, this portrait can be seen as a son's devotion to his father and his own allegiance to the Patriote cause.²¹



Silhouette Group Portrait with Lord and Lady Elgin on a Sleigh-ride, 1853

Artist unknown

Pen, brush point and black ink with scraping out, on wove paper; 8x33 cm

Library and Archives Canada/ R9772380E

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3994911>.

This striking silhouette was produced near the end of the silhouette's popularity in Montreal.²² This is a conversation piece of Lord and Lady Elgin sitting in a sleigh, with their footman standing on the back. In front of the sleigh, on horse back, are members of the household: Lady Alice Lambton (Lady Elgin's sister), Lord Mark Kerr (Lord Elgin's aide de camp), and their son, Victor Alexander Bruce. Lord Elgin was Governor General of Canada from 1845 until 1854, and during this period, he came to think of Canada as home.²³ The sleigh held particular importance for Elgin. He first journeyed to Montreal by this means of transportation, and he referenced his love of winter rides in his resignation speech, stating that, "I learnt in this beautiful neighbourhood to appreciate the charms of a bright Canadian winter day, and to take delight in the cheerful music of your sleigh bells."²⁴ It is interesting to note that there is a stylistic resemblance to the famous Elgin Marbles frieze that his father Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin (1766 – 1841) brought to England from the Parthenon in Greece.²⁵

NOTES

¹ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

² The legend of Dibutad as told by Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History* (circa 77-79AD) Books XXXIV and XXXV. She traced the outline of her lover on the wall before he went to war, this has later been reproduced as the origin of the silhouette. E. Nevill Jackson, *The History of Silhouettes*, London: The Connoisseur (1911): 3; and Emma Rutherford, *Silhouette*, New York: Rizzoli International Publications (2009): 13.

³ Penley Knipe, "Shades and Shadow-Pictures: The Materials and Techniques of American Portrait Silhouettes," (1999) St Louis, 24 Sept. 2011.

⁴ Bernini is quoted in Brilliant, 10; Edouart's studio practice as described in E. Nevill Jackson, *Ancestors in Silhouette*, Boston: Longwood Press (1977): 5.

⁵ Peggy Hickman, *Silhouettes: A Living Art* (North Pomfret: David & Charles Inc., 1975) 20.

⁶ Roslyn Margaret Rosenfeld, *Miniatures and Silhouettes in Montreal, 1760-1860*, MFA Thesis, Concordia University (1981): 72.

⁷ Anne Verplanck, "The Silhouette and Quaker Identity in Early National Philadelphia," *Winterthur Portfolio* 43:1 (2009) 11 Aug. 2011.

⁸ There are in fact a number of different techniques used to produce silhouettes including: smoke staining, hallow cut, cut out, wax molding, plaster molding, and painting on various surfaces. For more details see: Rutherford or Knipe; and Alice Van Leer Carrick, *Shades of Our Ancestors*, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1928.

⁹ Brilliant, 20.

¹⁰ Inscribe on the reverse is Harriet Amy Brown / only daughter of Mrs. Brown / née Amy L'Gete, sister / of my Father Dr. Charles / Blakeley Brown. I have found a doctor by this name in Royal College of Physicians of London, *List of the Fellows and Members*, London, 1842 *Internet Archive*. But, I have been unable to link this Doctor to the sitters of these silhouettes or Rober Auchmuty Sproule.

¹¹ Brilliant, 10.

¹² Penley Knipe, "Shades and Shadow-Pictures: The Materials and Techniques of American Portrait Silhouettes," *The Book and Paper Group Annual* 18 (1999) <<http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v18/bp18-07.html>>.

¹³ Rosenfeld, 11.

¹⁴ Rutherford, 11.

¹⁵ Dated 1827 in Rene Villeneuve, ed., *Lord Dalhousie: Patron and Collector*, Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada (2008): 34 and dated 1928 on the national archives site.

¹⁶ Villeneuve, 34.

¹⁷ Richard John Brown, *The Fils de la Liberte* (2011) 12 Oct. 2011; and Claude Baribeau, ed., *Papineau: His life and Times*, Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, 1987.

¹⁸ He cut pieces of dogs readily enough, but in his work of eminent figures this is the only North American example I could find. Andrew Oliver, *Auguste Edouart's Silhouettes of Eminent Americans, 1839-1844*, Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1977; E. Nevill Jackson, *Ancestors in silhouette*, Boston: Longwood Press, 1977; and Rutherford.

¹⁹ Sir James MacPherson Le Moine, *Picturesque Quebec: a Sequel to Quebec Past and Present* (Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1882) 252-3.

²⁰ Cynthia Freeland, *Portraits and Persons: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 16.

²¹ Baribeau, 6.

²² Rosenfeld.

²³ George M. Wrong, *The Earl of Elgin* (Toronto: George N. Morang & Co., 1906) 88.

²⁴ Theodore C. B. Walrond, ed., *Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969) 166.

²⁵ "Lord Elgin and the Parthenon Sculptures," *Britishmuseum.org*.

<http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/article_index/l/lord_elgin_and_the_arthenon.aspx>.

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