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JOAN R. BROWNSTEIN

AMERICAN FOLK PAINTINGS



Collecting 101

Joan Brownstein discusses American portrait silhouettes

Our September issue includes an article by Peter and Leslie Warwick on the artist Sarah De Hart, who created silhouette portraits of her friends, family, and acquaintances in New Jersey during the Revolutionary period. De Hart's silhouettes are all hollow-cut, meaning the artist cut each profile from white paper, which she then mounted on a black paper or silk background. For this edition of "Collecting 101," I've asked Joan Brownstein, a dealer based in Newbury, Massachusetts, who specializes in American folk portraits, to discuss different types of portrait silhouettes.

Question: Besides straight black and white silhouettes, what are some of the other ways folk artists have incorporated the silhouette into portraits?

Answer: Technically, the silhouette is defined as the outline of something, usually the human profile, filled in with solid color, or an outline that appears against a light background. Broadly interpreted, a number of different techniques used by folk artists could be thus described. The direct silhouette, cut from black paper and mounted on white, is the simplest—the artist produces a positive image and mounts it on a contrasting background, sometimes adding details in gold or applying cut paper that may be painted in colors to show small details, especially of the costume.

Hollow-cut silhouettes use a negative approach to creating form—the body is cut away and made to reappear by backing the open space with a dark background. Often this technique is used alone, but many folk artists worked the face in this manner and then painted in the body of the sitter in ways that allowed details of the body and costume to be described. This approach tends to be more decorative than the more straightforward black and white cut approach. Some enterprising artists combined examples of printing techniques to describe the body—first cutting the silhouette and then stamping a woodblock printed body beneath it. The examples I have seen that do this generally have internal costume details, but they have a standard male or female model. Another artist I have seen used a cutout printed lithograph of a body and painted it in the color of the subject's choice before gluing it to the paper background.

The most complex approach used by folk artists that can be considered a silhouette was the creation of small painted portraits, some rich in detail and even incorporating some rounding of forms but still having firmly delineated outlines, seen against an undefined background (or one that only minimally suggests that the figure is grounded in the space around it).

Question: Do you see many portrait silhouettes on the American folk art market?

Answer: Although by no means an American invention, the silhouette is particularly suited to the American artist, and most particularly to the folk artist. American art, more than its European counterpart, tends to emphasize the outlines of forms, as opposed to stressing three-dimensional form through the use of light. Likewise the folk artist, who tends to focus more on the surface of his or her image, relies more on outline than does a more academically trained artist.

Paper was cheaper than oil and canvas, more easily accessible, and required less training to manipulate the materials. The simpler the technique, the more works were made—probably many thousands of black and white silhouettes and small painted portraits were created. Also because these images were either inserted in books or framed behind glass, they were good candidates for survival.

Question: I always find these things to be so appealing. Is this an area you would recommend to young collectors? If yes, what should people look for and what should they expect to pay for them?

Answer: Silhouettes are a wonderful introduction to American folk painting for young collectors, and they are also popular among the most sophisticated collectors. Many collectors only collect black and white silhouettes, or only small painted portraits, while some mix images like these in collections that include larger painted oil portraits. A simple silhouette can cost a couple hundred dollars, while more fully developed portraits richer in decorative detail can cost over \$10,000.

Good design, an appealing sitter, a rare example of a known hand, and the inclusion of appealing decorative details all add value to these small portraits. Even their fragility is part of their appeal. Works on paper show the artist's hand least obscured by complex technique, and the knowledge that this was probably the only likeness that

ever recorded the sitter's existence carries huge emotional significance for many of us.



James Hosley Whitcomb's work is rare and known for the decorative flourish cut at the shoulder. Inscribed with the date and the name of the sitter, and in its original painted frame, which is similar to ones used on other examples of his work, this is a highly desirable image. New Hampshire.



Miss Honeywell was born without hands and cut silhouettes using her mouth to hold her scissors, as the inscription notes. Because of the artist's unusual circumstances and ability, her work is highly collectible. New England, c. 1810.



This woman with a hollow-cut head and painted body was made by an artist known as the "Puffy Sleeve Artist" because of the exaggerated size of the sitter's sleeve. The artist sometimes added painted details like the fan seen here. The work retains its original frame. New Hampshire or Massachusetts, c. 1830.



This hollow-cut silhouette has a green painted dress and gilt foil applied to make the sitter's belt buckle. The full length figure and the use of color and painted details add to its appeal. New England, c. 1830.