Cutting it fine

Once an alternative to the traditional miniature, the silhouette—or 18th-century 'selfie'—is now very much back in vogue and not to be snipped at, says **Claire Jackson**

There are currently no formal ways to learn the art of silhouettes in the UK; however, in the US, there is an unusual pathway. Walt Disney was a fan of silhouettes (shadows play a key role in the early Mickey cartoons, see The Sorcerer's Apprentice in the 1940 film *Fantasia*) and set up a studio at Disneyland. Today, silhouettists work across the resorts, with 'Disneyfication' of the historic art form giving rise to princess-style eyelashes and flattering jaw lines. Silhouette artists can also be found in tourist-portraiture hotspots, such as Montmartre in Paris, France.

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Turning the pages of Mr Burns's books reveals brides and grooms, party guests clutching Champagne flutes—and a man with a ponytail beard ('a great silhouette' remembers Mr Burns). There's also a rather well-known profile: our dear late Queen. 'It was at the Ritz, for her 80th-birthday party, in 2006; I cut it in exactly the same way I would usually do and handed it to her—she went around the room showing it to people.' Perhaps having your face on stamps and coins imbues someone with a certain confidence in their side portrait: when Mr Burns met the Queen at another event some years later, he was surprised that she remembered him. 'We were at St James's Palace and she said: "I rather think you've already done me."' Naturally, Mr Burns expressed delight that the silhouette had remained in her memory. The Queen replied: 'Of course I remember, it's hanging in my bedroom.'

Walt Disney's love of silhouette can be seen in *Fantasia*, the 1940 Mickey Mouse animation

Silhouettists have always adapted to cultural fashions of the age. As sending postcards became more accessible, artists sold silhouettes that could be pasted onto postal-sized correspondence. (The narcissistic aspect of sending an image of yourself to friends and family has much in common with modern-day social media.) When the pandemic curtailed cutting at parties, Mr Burns offered sittings via Zoom—something he continues today.

Family sittings inevitably involve the furry members, as well as human ones, with pet silhouettes becoming increasingly commonplace. Bow, my miniature dachshund gazes forwards as if she has been posing for silhouettes her entire life. The artist's scissors—surgical, for accuracy—move deftly across the page. Moments later, a profile appears on paper; with tiny dog hairs adding the illusion of texture. Bow looks impressed. 'There's always a challenge with silhouettes, whether it's accurately cutting spectacles or getting a dog to sit still,' points out Mr Burns. 'However, what you can achieve with paper and scissors never fails to surprise me.'

Charles Burns (0118–947 6637; www.roving-artist.com)

Silhouette sleuthing

A selection of silhouettes from the National Portrait Gallery's extensive collection has recently been made available for public view as part of the institution's rehang. 'Shadow profiles: Silhouettes' includes cut profiles of Edward Lear and his sister Catherine (artist unknown) and Charles Dickens (Harry Edwin), as well as some more unusual characters.

'There are etchings, paintings, paper-cuts and photographs—and taxidermy animals by Noble and Webster [Tim Noble and Sue Webster, 2002], which, when lit correctly, cast a shadow of the profile of fashion stylist Isabella Blow onto a wall,' explains Sarah Holdaway, who curated the display.

Another quirky piece is the witty portrait of Eileen Agar by Lee Miller, 1937, in which the photographer includes her own shadow

image, alongside the delightful 1832 Beveridge family portrait by Augustin Edouart. The display also features perhaps the most famous paper-cut of all, the whimsical portrait of Jean Forbes-Robertson as Peter Pan, snipped by Hubert Leslie during the 1930s. Forbes-Robertson adopts a dance-like posture, grasping Pan's ever-elusive grinning shadow. 'This is one of Leslie's masterpieces,' says Paul Cox, the gallery's reference collection curator, 'but equally valuable to the gallery are the many thousands of silhouettes of ordinary people [the images used by Charles Burns at the start of his career]. A volunteer is currently engaged on a project to identify and research the sitters of these portraits, all of whom signed the copy silhouettes that Leslie retained in his albums.'

Masterpiece: Leslie's famous portrait of Jean Forbes-Robertson as Peter Pan

FIXING my attention ahead in determination to be a good sitter, I sense encouragement from dozens of portraits on the walls around me. They have adopted a similar pose, staring into the distance of drawing-room parties: one man holds a cigarette, the plume of smoke swirling upwards. Another grasps a glass of something delicious he waits to sip. The pause in proceedings is miraculously short, for, unlike most portraiture, speed is part of silhouette art. At my side, Charles Burns snips away. Within less than a minute, I am presented with a shadowed profile, the likeness of which is irrefutable—no matter how much I wish the nose was a little shorter; the chin less pronounced. 'Silhouettes are the 18th-century selfie,' proclaims Mr Burns, smiling at my incredulity. 'There's something refreshing about an image made from paper and scissors—people enjoy the immediacy.'

Facing page: **Charles Burns in silhouette.** *Above:* **The artist in person, snipping likenesses of guests at a COUNTRY LIFE party.** *Below:* **His profile of the author's dog, Bow**

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Silhouettes became popular during the Regency, where a blackened profile was used as a quicker—and cheaper—alternative to the traditional miniature (the portrait of Jane Austen is probably the most famous example). The earliest artists experimented with shadowgraph and physiognotrace machines, using actual shadows and automatic pantographs to create smaller-scale versions. The images were traced onto paper, plaster, ivory and, in the case of Isabella Beetham—the 18th-century Society artist who had a studio on Fleet Street—glass, which was then painted. Some added embellishments—Mr Burns's expansive collection features portraits with crayon-marked curls and jacket detailing—but the style is notable for its monochrome palette.

Although Queen Victoria sat for a silhouette, probably by Benjamin Pearce, the Victorians eschewed silhouettes as unbearably old-fashioned, preferring observational realism and photography. Revival in the art form came after the First World War. Artists such as Hubert Leslie (1890–1976) set up stalls on seaside piers, where silhouettes were first cut freehand. It was Leslie to whom Mr Burns turned when he first began cutting silhouettes: the artist pioneered the simple, yet game-changing, technique of cutting two pieces of paper simultaneously. It meant that an accurate record could be kept of every piece—20,000 silhouettes by Leslie are held in the National Portrait Gallery archives. Mr Burns, who began his career drawing portraits in Covent Garden, used to spend rainy afternoons copying Leslie's back catalogue, echoing aspiring landscape artists emulating Turner. In time, Mr Burns developed his own distinctive style and cutting silhouettes quickly overtook painting.

'Getting the proportions correct is essential,' explains Mr Burns. 'They are not a complete shadow, so features can be exaggerated very slightly.' Seeing yourself in profile can be disconcerting—it's not a pose that is commonly adopted and has an unfortunate association with police mugshots. 'You don't always recognise your own silhouette,' agrees Mr Burns. 'Sometimes, people's reactions are self conscious.' (Thus explaining my initial response: rhinoplasty, now.)

Silhouettes are a charming way of commemorating an occasion, particularly in a digital age where we are inundated with instant photography, and the speed at which Mr Burns works makes his craft popular at events. There's an element of performance art to silhouette cutting. 'Most artists don't want their subjects to see a piece before it's finished—I learned not only to tolerate it, but to enjoy it: the bigger the crowd, the better the portrait,' notes Mr Burns. 'It's like being on stage in many ways.'

Inspired by Leslie, Mr Burns maintains his own archives. The 70-odd, beautifully bound volumes hold more than 250,000 silhouettes. The artist carefully writes my name on the white paper duplicate of my own silhouette—in time, it will join the other outlines, potentially to be copied out by future silhouettists. →

A cut above the rest

When it opened in 1923, Gothenburg's Liseberg Amusement Park invited silhouettist Henry Harrison—thought to be British, although biographical details are scant—to cut profiles of the first visitors. For several decades afterwards, the Swedish resort had an on-site silhouette booth (emulating the Disney resorts and English piers). Earlier this year, Charles Burns and Michael Herbert were invited to attend the centenary event and to cut silhouettes of some 500 guests, in honour of the role the art form had played throughout Liseberg's history. Mr Burns was familiar with Harrison's work, having several of his silhouettes in his own collection; however, little is really known about the artist. A photograph of Harrison cutting in the Liseberg studio depicts a dashing man in a trilby snipping a profile of a boy standing on a chair—a technique silhouettists still use today.

Alamy; Charles Burns; Daniel Gould/Country Life Picture Library/Future Plc; National Portrait Gallery, London