

ART ACTIVITY

Silhouettes

Background

Silhouettes, the outline of a person set against a contrasting background, were a popular form of portraiture in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries. Silhouettes were quickly made by traveling artists with simple materials. Silhouette artists could create these portraits for clients in cities and small towns, and in both public and private spaces. For this reason, historians call silhouettes the most democratic art form of the Federal period. Silhouettes can be made in three ways:

- 1) Painting the profile onto a piece of paper;
- 2) Cutting the profile from the center of a light-colored paper and placing it on a dark background; or
- 3) Cutting the profile from dark paper and pasting it onto a light background.

Many artists are still inspired by the technique and aesthetic of silhouettes today.

Task

By analyzing the silhouettes created by Martha Ann Honeywell, a disabled artist from the Federal period, students will discuss the process and purpose of a silhouette portrait. They will also consider why silhouettes came to be hailed as the most democratic artform of the Federal period. Then students will create their own silhouette of a classmate.

Materials

- Black construction paper or mixed media paper (18 x 24)

- White construction paper or mixed media paper (18 x 24)
- Scissors
- Pencils
- Glue
- Desk lamp, flashlight, or smartphone flashlight
- Artist tape

Art Vocabulary

- **contrast:** A principle of art that refers to the arrangement of opposing elements, such as dark and light colors.
- **portrait:** A pictorial representation of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head and shoulders.
- **profile:** A representation of something in outline, especially a human head or face represented or seen in a side view.
- **silhouette:** An art form that features the outline of a person, animal, or object placed against a contrasting background.

Steps

- Invite students to consider how and why people have portraits made.
 - What do you think of when you hear the word “portrait”?
 - Why do people make and keep portraits? What are the different ways that portraits can be made?
 - Who can have their portrait taken or made today? Do you think this was always the case?
 - What can we learn about people from their portraits?
 - What can we learn about the artist or photographer by viewing a portrait

they made?

- Ask students if they've ever heard of silhouette portraits. What do they think a silhouette portrait is? How might silhouettes have been made?
- Next, introduce students to the silhouettes of Martha Ann Honeywell, a disabled artist from the 18th century who created her silhouettes using her mouth and toes. Lead an inquiry with her *Silhouette of Theodore Laveille* using the following line of questioning:
 - What do you notice? How does this differ from what you imagine when you think of the word "portrait"?
 - How do you think these silhouettes were made?
 - What materials do you think artists needed to create silhouettes?
 - How long do you think it took to create a silhouette? Do you think it would have taken as long as having your portrait painted?
 - Silhouettes could be made relatively quickly and with simple materials. How might these things affect who was able to have their silhouettes made?
 - Why do you think historians refer to silhouettes as the most democratic art form of the Federal period?
 - Many silhouette artists like Martha Ann Honeywell would travel the country and create silhouettes for customers in spaces like museums, taverns, and boarding houses. What does this tell us about silhouettes as an artform?
- Give students the opportunity to take a look at another silhouette, the portraits of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake, a lesbian couple from the same time period.
 - What do you notice about this silhouette?
 - What are the differences between this silhouette and the silhouette made by Martha Ann Honeywell?
 - How is each silhouette unique?

- What can you learn about the sitter and the artist from analyzing their silhouette portraits?
- Students will now have the opportunity to create their own silhouettes of their classmates. Assign partners and give each student two sheets of white paper, one sheet of black paper, scissors, tape, and glue.
- Students should tape a piece of white paper to the wall and have their partner sit facing to the side, so they are viewing them in profile.
- Turn off classroom lights and have students position their desk lamp or flashlight so that it casts the shadow of the sitter onto the paper taped to the wall. Students should position the light source and sitter so that the shadow of their head, neck, and shoulders is cast onto the paper.
- Students trace the outline of their partner's shadow onto the white paper with a pencil, then take the paper down and cut out their partner's silhouette.
- Next, have students place their silhouette template down onto their black sheet of paper and trace along the edges.
- Finally, have students cut out the silhouette from their black paper and glue it down to their second sheet of white paper. If they like, they can draw designs along the edges of their white paper to decoratively frame their silhouette.
- When their silhouettes are finished, have students reflect on the following.
 - What was it like to create a portrait this way?
 - How is the product different from other portraits you may have created in the past?
 - What would it have been like to cut your partner's silhouette freehand without being able to trace their shadow?
 - Why do you think this type of portrait was so popular during this time period?
- Extension: Have students study the work of contemporary artists like Kara Walker that have been inspired by silhouettes and discuss the different interpretations of the artform across time.