

Silhouette: The Art of the Shadow

Emma Rutherford

Rizzoli (Oct 6, 2009)

\$65.00 (256pp)

978-0-8478-3077-0

As treasured keepsakes and fine works of craftsmanship, silhouettes played a significant role in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century life. In *Silhouettes*, Emma Rutherford explores the history, technique, and cultural significance of a classic art. Along the way, more than 250 full-color illustrations showcase the humble craft's stunning elegance.

Rutherford begins with the fascinating history of how silhouettes came into vogue, thanks to a perfect merging of popular science and classical design preferences. At the time, Rutherford explains, "there was a strong desire for a return to nature and an emphasis on uncorrupted simplicity." Additionally, her delightful discussion on why the paper cuttings were called *silhouettes* illustrates how culture impacts art.

Moving into a discussion on innovations such as pantographs and physiognotracés, Rutherford connects with technologically savvy readers. Such inventions fascinated Victorian customers, an interest that seems oddly contemporary since technologically-driven art, such as computer animation, captivates our modern culture. However, many silhouettists transformed their work into a higher art. Rutherford's explanations of painting techniques and methods for framing, colorizing, and gilding otherwise simple silhouettes highlight the artistry involved.

The section on the silhouettists' place in British culture introduces Augustin Edouart, John Miers, Jacob Spornberg, and others—people who straddled society like few could, interacting with merchants and kings, and possessing incredible business sense. Silhouettists needed perfect locations and powerful marketing. Some promoted technology, while others offered additional services. Some services, such as painting miniatures, also improved their reputations. As Rutherford points out, "Silhouettists were generally seen as providing a service, while miniaturists held a higher, more revered status."

In the final section, Rutherford describes American silhouettists, craftsmen challenged by the needs of a sprawling country with a swelling immigrant population. She explains, "As many American silhouettists were itinerant artists, their techniques were, by force of practicality, the absolute simplest methods."

Here, the author's storytelling shines. Tales of spying, shipwreck, and high society captivate as readers learn about Charles Willson Peale, William Masey Stroud Doyle, and Major John André.

Beautiful and overflowing with charming illustrations, Rutherford's book proves full of substance. While she nearly veers off track with her history at a couple of points, she successfully reins things in. Art enthusiasts will gain a greater understanding of a classic form. History lovers will discover an unexpected depth. And all readers will gain a greater appreciation for the men and women who practiced an old-fashioned art in surprisingly modern ways.

DIANE GARDNER (September / October 2009)

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