The art of silhouettes—black profile cut-paper or painted images—emerged as a popular form of portraiture in late-18th- and 19th-century America when there were few trained portrait painters. Drawn mostly from New-York Historical’s significant collection, In Profile: A Look at Silhouettes traces the development of this popular art form and explores its contemporary revival. The exhibition showcases works by professional practitioners, like master of the genre Augustin Édouart, Charles Willson Peale, and Master Hubard. Also featured are self-trained artists such as the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen and Martha Anne Honeywell—a woman born without arms and only three toes, who cut profiles for 60 years in America and Europe. Contemporary works by, among others, Béatrice Coron, James Prosek, Kumi Yamashita, and Kara Walker, reveal the art form’s powerful reemergence.

Trained in military draftsmanship, both Valdenuit and Saint-Mémin were aristocrats who fled the French Revolution, and needed to earn a living while in exile in New York City. Their two-year partnership is first documented in this painted silhouette.

Benjamin Tappan began his life as a printer and engraver. He studied painting with Gilbert Stuart, before becoming a judge and a U.S. Senator. Tappan drew this series of life-size silhouettes during his early career as an artist. They involved tracing process, either by outlining a shadow or the sitters’ profiles with a device called a physiognotrace, after which the artist applied gray wash inside the outlines.
Charles Balthazar Julien Févret de Saint-Mémin
(1770–1852)
**Unidentified Osage (Chief of the Little Osage), 1804**
Charcoal with stumping, black pastel, black and white chalk, and Conté crayon over graphite on pink prepared paper, nailed over canvas to a wooden strainer
New-York Historical Society, Elizabeth DeMilt Fund, 1860.93

*Although Saint-Mémin’s stunning portrayal is not a silhouette, it demonstrates the use of the physiognotrace that many silhouettists employed. The artist initially outlined the contour of the sitter’s profile with the device, in this case using graphite to transfer it to paper. He then developed it with “crayons” as well as charcoal.*

William Bache (1771–1845)
**Alexander Hamilton (ca. 1755–1804), ca. 1800**
Black ink with touches of white gouache on ivory paper
New-York Historical Society, Z.2459

*William Bache was an itinerant professional silhouettist whose ledger book preserves a collection of likenesses and records his method of cutting. He first traced and then cut a sitter’s profile, after which he gave the hollow-cut paper to his customer and kept the head for his records. The ledger contains 1,846 profiles that cut across socio-economic, racial, and ethnic lines. This painted silhouette is unusual for Bache.*

Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795), manufacturer; William Hackwood (ca. 1757–1839), designer
**Antislavery medallion mounted as a pin: Am I Not a Man and a Brother?, 1787**
Jasperware, metal
New-York Historical Society, Gift of Selma H. Rutenburg, MD, given in memory of Nina and Jack Gray, 2013.21

*Wedgwood produced Hackwood’s design as a small medallion or cameo, which could stand on its own or be mounted and worn as a pin or necklace. Anti-slavery activists distributed the medallion in England. The U.S. abolition societies gave it to supporters.*
Martha Ann (Anne) Honeywell (1786–1856)  
**The Lord’s Prayer**, 1845  
Beige paper cut-out laid on black, light blue, and purple papers, pierced with a pin and stitched in silk  
New-York Historical Society, INV.10816

Honeywell—who was born without hands or forearms and had only three toes on one foot—created her art using her mouth, toes, and the stump of one arm. She was known for her silhouettes, intricate paper cut-outs, needlework, and penmanship in works that played with contradictions between ability and disability. One of her specialties was a cut-out Lord’s Prayer. She displayed her talents in at least 35 American cities and five European countries, where her work was universally admired. She continued to enhance the quality of her work, experiment with different media, and adeptly manage the commercial side of her business.

Augustin Amant Constant Fidèle Édouart (1789–1861)  
**Philip Milledoler Beekman (1845–1846)**, 1846  
Black prepared paper cut-out with graphite, laid on yellow paper with lithographed background and gray and brown wash  

The comfortable, even grand interior of the house in the lithographic background underscores the domestic tragedy of this commemorative portrait. Édouart’s highly sophisticated, poignant silhouette portrays the Beekman toddler playing with a jack-in-the-box. The infant son of James W. Beekman and Abian Steele Milledoler died when he was just 14 months old on summer holiday in Saratoga, where the silhouette was cut.
Augustin Amant Constant Fidèle Édouart (1789–1861)

**George Ring and Family**, 1840
Black prepared paper cut-outs, laid on beige paper with graphite, brown ink and wash, white gouache, and collaged paper, laid on Japanese paper, laid on board
New-York Historical Society, Z.3451

Édouart’s records indicate that he cut the Ring family members on March 21, 1840, in New York City. George Ring and his brother John were ship chandlers. This parlor panorama takes place in a highly finished drawing room setting that Édouart rendered in wash and other media, with linear perspective calculations in graphite. These group scenes with personal possessions afford a glimpse into the domestic interiors of the period.

Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875)

**Acrobats**, ca. 1835–60
Hollow-cut black paper laid on ivory paper
Private collection, New York

The prolific Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, best remembered for his fairy tales and stories—The Little Mermaid, The Red Shoes, The Little Match Girl, and The Ugly Duckling—was also a gifted paper-cutting artist. He created imaginative, whimsical compositions throughout his life, frequently for the entertainment of children and adults when he was a celebrity guest in the residences of his hosts and admirers.
Unidentified artist

Students and teachers, selections from Miss Haines’s School silhouette series, 1859
Black prepared paper cut-outs laid on beige paper

From the mid-1800s, many celebrities and notables frequented the Gramercy Park area, including writers Stephen Crane, Walt Whitman, Edith Wharton, and O. Henry. It was also the site of Miss Henrietta Haines’s School for Girls at 10 Gramercy Park East, where many of the daughters of wealthy families studied. The full-length silhouettes of both students and faculty reveal how much information a simple profile can convey.

Kara Walker (b. 1969)

Maquette for The “Katastwóf Karavan”, 2017
Painted laser-cut stainless steel
Private collection

In February 2018, Kara Walker unveiled a major public art project at Algiers Point in New Orleans: The “Katastwóf Karavan”, a calliope (steam organ) housed in a horse-drawn wagon. Walker was inspired to create it during a visit to Algiers Point on the banks of the Mississippi River, where slaves were once quarantined, and, more recently, black men shot on sight by white vigilantes after Hurricane Katrina. Both Walker’s full-size calliope and the small maquettes feature laser-cut sides that recall her signature medium, cut-paper silhouettes.
Béatrice Coron (b. 1956)

Manhattan, Part of the Set “Hi Five! Stories from the Five Boroughs”, 2019
Hand-cut Tyvek
New-York Historical Society, Purchase, 2019.96

Book artist, paper cutter, sculptor, and conceptual artist, Béatrice Coron has reinvigorated the silhouette genre with kaleidoscopic subjects that are both playful and cutting in their satire and social commentary. Coron hand-cut her panoramic series of the five boroughs New York City, each eight feet long. The series showcases her unique take on the dynamic synergy of the city.

James Prosek (b. 1975)

Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be The Same, 2019; Avian Composition with Warblers, 2018
Acrylic paint on wall surface and paint on panel
Courtesy of the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

Artist and naturalist James Prosek is passionate about the preservation of wildlife and their habitats. In this installation, he has created his own avian ecosystem, using life-size avian silhouettes that channel the famous field guides of Roger Tory Peterson and the historic full-sized birds of John James Audubon. The endpapers of Peterson’s field guides feature “Roadside Silhouettes” and “Flight Silhouettes,” with each bird numbered and their species identified in a key. The title of Prosek’s mural derives from a sonnet by Robert Frost. This image shows a proposal for the final work and also features at the center of the composition a separate painting on a panel of warblers.
Recognized as a light sculptor, Kumi Yamashita uses traditional Japanese origami paper and light to create witty and moving double entendres of silhouette processes. Her unique sculptural method creates shadow profile portraits of individuals whose identities are not revealed to ensure the larger poetic, universal nature of the work. This image shows a work similar to the one installed in the exhibition.