

“Silhouette of man 1” - Taken At The Hubard Gallery

Research by Megan Hansen-Knarhoi *

Whilst cataloguing portraits in the Art Collection I made an interesting and amusing discovery about a silhouette artwork and its creator. The silhouette was a fashionable style of portraiture cheaper than, and in competition with photography during the Victorian Era¹. Greek legend had it that the silhouette originated when a Corinthian maid outlined her departing lover's shadow on the wall to preserve his image whilst he was away. The myth was popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at the height of the art of the silhouette². The science of Physiognomy was also in vogue, the belief that moral and spiritual character could be studied in the human face, the most accurate vehicle for examining the countenance through the silhouette³.



Silhouette of man 1, Art Collection, A1676 – AC 913

In the Nelson Provincial Museum's Art collection is 'Silhouette of man I' (pictured above). As I scanned the image for more detail to include in my written description, I noticed an upside-down stamp mark "Taken at The Hubard Gallery" disguised at the bottom of the composition. Being a researcher, and partly because my curiosity was piqued, I immediately jumped on the internet for contextual information.

The Hubard Gallery, based in New York, was the namesake of the artist who made the silhouettes. Master William James Hubard (1807-1862) emigrated to America at the age of 17 chaperoned by a Mr. Smith, who reputedly had an exploitative hold on Hubard, and a definite flare for writing advertising copy to promote the talent of his charge. Published in the *Columbian Sentinal of Boston*, November 16, 1825 was written: "The Papyrotomia, or Hubard Gallery, is a splendid collection of cuttings in paper, the productions of Master Hubard, a boy who possesses the peculiar faculty of delineating every object in nature and art simply with a pair of common scissors."⁴ The silhouette was created by a 'likeness' being cut out of black paper in profile and pasted to a

¹ Penley Knipe, 'Shades and Shadow-Pictures: The Materials and Techniques of American Portrait Silhouettes' from 'The Book and Paper Group ANNUAL, Vol. 18, 1999' <http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v18/bp18-07.html> accessed 08/12/09

² Knipe

³ Knipe

⁴Helen B. McCormick, 'Virginia Enriched by Hubard Silhouette: Secret of Artist's Scissor Ability revealed 73 years After His Death, Adds new Laurels to Already Illustrious Name', from 'Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 7, 1935' <http://richmondthenandnow.com/Newspaper-Articles/William-James-Hubard-Silhouette.html> accessed 25/11/09

white card. The subject was then 'grounded' with a wash of watercolour and even a watercolour cast shadow.⁵ After 1840 cut-outs were more frequently decorated in order to compete with photography. Silhouettes were decorated with graphite, ink, whites, and gold colours.⁶ A portrait cost 50 cents.

Hubard was a child prodigy whose artistic career began in England at the age of 7. He was observed by his parents to be extremely attentive during a service at the village church, only to later discover at home likenesses of their minister, his pulpit and his predecessor cut out of paper. Hubard's talent was considered a "novelty in science which deserves, nay, which demands critical notice"⁷. His notoriety and popularity grew, and at the age of 15 was commissioned to cut the silhouettes of the Duchess of Kent and Princess Victorine, the future queen of England.⁸

In 1827 Hubard broke from Mr. Smith who continued to run the Hubard Gallery until about 1845, employing a number of other silhouette artists.⁹ Hubard evolved his talent in to painting portraits. In the latter part of the 1830's Hubard married Maria Mason Tabb of Gloucester, Virginia and settled there with her. In the 1850's, Hubard became interested in sculpture and established a foundry in Richmond, Virginia for casting bronzes. He made bronze castings of Jean-Antoine Houdon's marble statue of George Washington, devoting a lot of his time and finances to this project between 1853 to 1860.¹⁰

At the outbreak of civil war 1861, William James Hubard beat his ploughshare (sharp steel wedge that cuts loose the top layer of soil when ploughing) into a sword, and converted and dedicated his foundry to the production of rough bronze castings for machining into cannon barrels. He also began experimenting with gunpowder and explosive projectiles for the Brook gun, and in 1862 accidentally blew himself up.¹¹

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⁵ Knipe

⁶ Knipe

⁷ 'A CATALOGUE OF THE SUBJECTS CONTAINED IN THE Hubard Gallery; TO WHICH IS PREFIXED, A BRIEF MEMOIR OF MASTER HUBARD. THIRD EDITION'. Philadelphia. Atkinson & Alexander, printers. 1825.
http://books.google.co.nz/books?id=gtwYAAAAYAAJ&dq=Master+William+James+Hubard&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=sxmaMrkkKQ&sig=oZy7nrVff38OaV5Ednl1Wty8ank&hl=en&ei=BbUdS5azLY20swPsvsSCCG&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6&ved=0CBoQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=&f=false

⁸ Peggy McClard Antiques Americana & Folk Art, 'Silhouettist Bios'

<http://www.peggymcclard.com/aaa%20Silhouettist%20Biographies.htm> accessed 08/12/09

⁹ Peggy McClard Antiques Americana & Folk Art

¹⁰ Austin Meredith, 'The English Silhouettist William James Hubard and Henry Thoreau's Harvard Graduation Silhouette', 2005. p 22 <http://www.kouros.info/Thoreau/HarvardGraduationSilhouette.pdf> accessed 08/12/09

¹¹ Meredith, p 29