

Previsit Activity #3

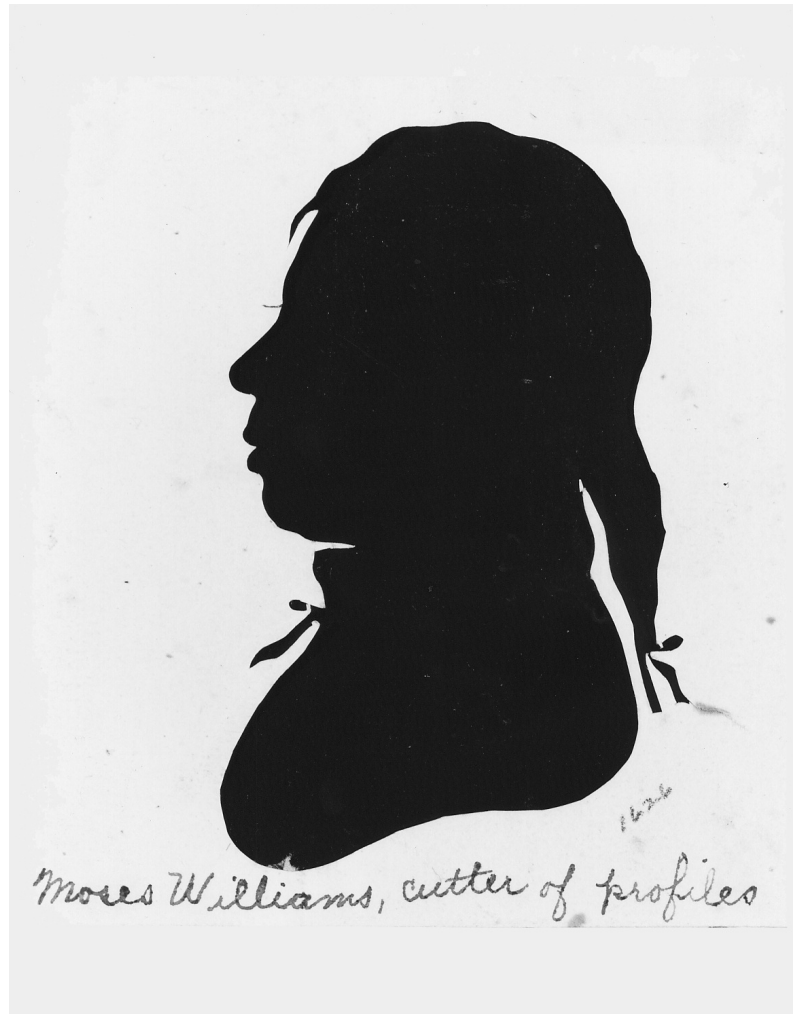
Silhouettes (sill-oo-ets)

In 1802 Charles Willson Peale brought a new machine to his Philadelphia Museum. The machine was called a physiognotrace (fizz-ee-og-no-trace) for its ability to “trace” a person’s profile, and the science of “physiognomy”, which people believed explained how a person’s character or personality could be learned through their appearance, especially by looking at the face or shape of the head.

The physiognotrace was invented by John Isaac Hawkins, who gave the machine to Peale to use in his museum. A person would sit facing sideways in front of the machine. A brass pointer traced along the profile of the head as a corresponding pencil drew a smaller profile onto a paper in the machine. The paper was folded, and the profile cut out from the center with scissors, leaving a hollow-cut portrait profile in the white paper, which was then pasted onto a black background for display.

The folded paper would make four exact copies, which made it easy to share with family and friends. This kind of portrait, also called a *profile*, a *likeness*, a *shade*, or a *silhouette*, was a fast and cheap method of recording what people looked like before the invention of photography. Unlike a portrait painting, silhouettes cost only a few cents and took only a few minutes to make. 8,800 people came to Peale’s museum in 1803 for silhouettes, and Peale claimed a few years later that silhouettes could be found in “nearly every house in the United States of America.”

Many of the silhouettes at Peale’s Museum were made by Moses Williams. Peale legally freed Williams from enslavement in 1803 and allowed him to continue to work at the museum for many years, earning and keeping the eight cents per silhouette fee. Williams became known for his artistic talent and skill at cutting profiles in the Philadelphia Museum.



You and your classmates can make your own silhouettes.

Materials:

Overhead projector or large flashlight

Pencils

Newsprint or large paper

Scissors

Black paper of the same size or larger

Masking Tape

Instructions for student led activity (may take several class periods to complete all students):

1. Follow along carefully as your teacher demonstrates how to trace the outline for a silhouette of a student, using a strong direct light (source such as an overhead projector light), a pencil, and light colored paper/newsprint paper taped to the blackboard.
2. Working in a group, decide who will pose first and who will draw. You will have 5 MINUTES to sketch the outline. Switch places so that everyone poses for a silhouette.
3. Using a pencil or pen, go over your traced outline again, so that you will be able to see the lines clearly when cutting out later on.
4. Place your silhouette over a piece of black paper and tape it to the black paper, placing a piece of tape on all 4 sides to keep in place.
5. Cut out the facial shape to make your silhouette, cutting through the newsprint and the black paper.
6. Optional: You can glue or tape your silhouette to a piece of white paper to “frame” it.
***If your class is short on time, this activity can be completed more quickly if the students line up and the teacher does the outline for each student.