



c. 1802–11

Hollow-cut silhouette

Sheet (irregular): 4 7/8 x 3 15/16 inches
(12.4 x 10 cm)

MOSES WILLIAMS

American

Gift of the McNeil Americana Collection,
2009, 2009-18-42(99)

LET'S LOOK

Compare Moses Williams's cut-paper profiles. What features make each profile unique?

Why do you think everyone is facing to the side and not to the front?

What can you tell about each person? What details are not included?

Why do people want images of themselves?

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

All of Williams's profiles were cut out of paper. What parts do you think would be the most difficult to cut? Why do you think that?

What clues tell you that these people lived about two hundred years ago?

Choose two people who are represented in Williams's cut-paper profiles and imagine them meeting on the street. What would they say to each other?

DR. JAMES HUNTER FAYSSOUX

Cut-paper profiles are one example of how Americans had their portraits made before the invention of photography. About the size of a baseball card, they show a person's face from a side view. These particular profiles were made at Charles Willson Peale's Museum in Philadelphia by Moses Williams, a man of European and African ancestry, who was enslaved until he was manumitted (legally freed) by Peale in 1802. That year, Williams began cutting profiles for visitors at the museum. It took great skill to cut the elegant lines of these intimate works of art, and he became well-known for his special talent.

How did Williams create the profiles? First, a person sat on a stool, facing sideways. Using a newly invented machine called a physiognotrace ("fiz-ee-OG-no-trace"), Williams followed the surface of the sitter's head with a dowel, causing a pointed instrument to impress an outline onto white paper secured at the top of the machine. For the most critical step of the process, Williams removed the paper from the machine and used scissors to cut out the person's profile from the middle. He made slight alterations to the machine's lines so that he could create the most accurate portrait possible. Because the paper was folded twice, he produced four exact profiles at once. Each profile was placed on top of black or dark blue paper so that the person's portrait stood out. Sometimes fine details such as eyelashes were added with black ink. Remarkably, this entire process only took a few minutes.

Notice the intricate details in the profiles such as the tufts of hair, neckties, bows, and subtle differences in the shapes of noses, chins, and lips. Unlike drawing or painting where an artist can erase lines or paint over unwanted details, there is little room for error when cutting profiles. Peale recognized Williams's artistic talent, writing in

a letter to the inventor of the machine in 1807, “the physiognotrace is still in demand . . . the perfection of Moses’s cutting supports its reputation of correct likeness.” Visitors paid Williams eight cents for a set of four profiles. Approximately 8,880 people, about 80% of all visitors to Peale’s Museum, purchased profiles in 1803, the first full year that the service was offered.



Dr. Fayssoux



Captain Robert Gill



Hannah Brown



Charles Willson Peale



Elizabeth DePeyster Peale



Raphaelle Peale



This boy’s profile is being made with a machine called a physiognotrace (“fiz-ee-OG-no-trace”). The dowel, which is near his chin, will follow the surface of his head, causing the pointed instrument at the top of the machine (here, a pencil) to draw an outline of his profile on the white paper. The profile is then cut out of the center of the white paper and placed on black paper.

The profiles seen here are part of a larger collection assembled by a member of the Peale family and kept together in a large book. Some of the sitters are well-known, such as the artist Charles Willson Peale (bottom row, left), his second wife, Elizabeth DePeyster Peale (bottom row, center), and his son Raphaelle (bottom row, right). Many Americans during this period collected profiles of their friends and family members. Because profiles were inexpensive, small, and came in multiples, it was fun and easy to trade them with others. Since painted portraits were very costly, many people displayed framed paper profiles in their homes instead. Today, these small but significant works of art continue to tell us about life in Philadelphia two centuries ago.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Moses Williams (c. 1775–c. 1825) was born into slavery; his parents, Lucy and Scarborough, were owned by the artist Charles Willson Peale. It is believed that Peale acquired them as payment for

portraits he painted in Annapolis, Maryland, between 1769 and 1775. After he moved to Philadelphia in 1776, Peale manumitted Lucy and Scarborough under the 1780 Gradual Abolition of Slavery Act, a law that he helped to pass. Upon gaining his freedom, Scarborough changed his name to John Williams.



*Moses Williams,
Cutter of Profiles*
after 1802

**ATTRIBUTED TO
RAPHAELLE PEALE**
American (1774–1825)

White laid paper
on black stock

3 1/2 x 3 3/8 inches (8.9 x 8.6 cm)

The Library Company of Philadelphia

Moses was eleven years old when his parents were freed and, according to the law, was to remain enslaved until he was twenty-eight. He worked in Peale's Museum, which displayed paintings, inventions, and fossils, as well as preserved insects, birds, and other animals. Williams was trained in taxidermy, object display, and the operation of the physiognotrace. Peale manumitted him in 1802, one year before his twenty-eighth birthday. Like his father, Moses took the last name Williams when he was freed.

After gaining his freedom, Williams earned a steady income through the fees he collected for cutting profiles at Peale's Museum. A few years later, he had saved enough money to purchase a two-story brick house in Philadelphia. He married a white woman named Maria who had served as the Peale family's cook. The couple had a daughter, but little information has been found about her. Although many details remain to be discovered about Williams's life, his financial and personal success during a time when African Americans faced severe discrimination is a testament to his artistic skills and determination.

THE 1780 GRADUAL ABOLITION OF SLAVERY ACT

People of African descent lived in the Delaware River Valley as early as 1639, enslaved by the Swedish, Dutch, and Finnish settlers. It is estimated that there were approximately 1,400 enslaved people in urban Philadelphia in 1767, representing about 9% of the total population of about 16,000. Slavery would end slowly in Pennsylvania. In 1780, the Gradual Abolition of Slavery Act was passed. This law did not abolish slavery immediately. Instead, it stated that any enslaved people in the state who were born before March 1, 1780, would remain "slaves for life," unless they were legally freed. Children born to enslaved mothers, such as Moses Williams, would be freed at age twenty-eight. By 1790, there were 239 slaves in Philadelphia, according to the census taken that year. It is unknown when the last slave was freed in Pennsylvania, but slavery was formally abolished on February 3, 1865, when the state ratified the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Living in Philadelphia in the early nineteenth century, Moses Williams was a part of one of the largest populations of freed African Americans in the United States. Many worked as day laborers,



Footed Cup
1841

PETER BENTZON
American

Silver

6 7/8 x 5 3/8 x 4 inches (17.5 x 13.7 x 10.2
cm) Weight: 15 ounces 17.5 dwt

Purchased with the Thomas Skelton Harrison
Fund and with the partial gift of Wynard
Wilkinson, 1994, 1994-56-1

domestic servants, and mariners, and a growing number of them were entrepreneurs and artisans like Williams. James Forten (1766–1842) was a wealthy sailmaker and prominent social activist who supported abolitionist causes. Silversmith Peter Bentzon (active 1810–1848) trained in Philadelphia and lived and worked both on the Caribbean island of Saint Croix and in Pennsylvania. Cabinetmaker Thomas Gross, Jr., (1775–1839) owned and operated a shop in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Museum of Art has examples of work by Bentzon (like the silver cup shown here) and Gross in its collection.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

Where else can you find profile portraits? For example, investigate coins from many different times and places, including modern money and ancient Roman coins. How are they similar and different to Williams’s profiles? What other cultures have recorded people’s

likeness in profiles? Explore the origin of the artistic tradition in each culture.

Research the history of the freed African American community in Philadelphia. How did the population change over time? How did its size compare to that of other cities in the United States? Investigate the roles of African American leaders in religion, the arts, politics, education, business, and social activism in Philadelphia.

Investigate the 1780 Gradual Abolition of Slavery Act. What does the law state? Why weren’t all slaves in Pennsylvania freed at that time?

RELATED ART PROJECT

In pairs, make cut-out profiles by tracing the shadow of each partner’s face. One student stands in front of an overhead projector so that his or her profile’s shadow appears on the wall. The other student traces the outline of the shadow onto white paper taped to the wall. Cut along the line and place the profile on black paper for contrast.

This object is included in Pennsylvania Art: From Colony to Nation, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and generously supported by the Sherman Fairchild Foundation, Inc.