

Express

The National Portrait Gallery's silhouettes exhibit offers an alternate cut of American history

By Miriam Berg
May 10

If you were in America between the Revolutionary and Civil wars and wanted to record your image, you had two main options: sit for hours for an expensive portrait, or get a 25-cent silhouette of your profile in minutes. For hundreds of thousands of Americans, a cut-paper silhouette was the way to go.

The National Portrait Gallery, which already has prime examples of expensive portraits, is now celebrating the other art form with the nation's first major museum exhibit of historical and contemporary silhouettes. "Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now" includes representations of people sometimes overlooked in museums, including slaves, people with disabilities, and female activists from the 18th and 19th centuries.

"Silhouettes bring in stories of so many people who are normally in the shadows," says Asma Naeem, the museum's curator of prints, drawings and media arts.

Before photography became widespread, traveling silhouette cutters would set up shop in town and use incising instruments or ink and scissors to make their portraits. "Black Out" includes silhouettes by Moses Williams, who was born into slavery and became a sought-after silhouettist in the early 1800s, as well as panoramic murals by contemporary silhouettist Kara Walker, who sets black figures against a white wall in nightmarish scenes of antebellum plantations.

"Silhouettes are everywhere and we don't really recognize them," Naeem says, noting the ubiquitous magazine covers of President Trump's outlined visage and default Facebook profile pictures. "It's a very powerful, fast way to convey a person, but also to suggest that person is everybody."

[National Portrait Gallery](#), Eighth and F streets NW; Fri. through March 10, free.





(The Stratford Historical Society)

Flora (1796)

This life-size profile of a 19-year-old named Flora is one of the few known portraits of an enslaved woman in America. "It is heart-wrenching to come face to face with her profile," Naeem says. Flora's silhouette and bill of sale document the slave trade's brutality. "You can imagine the range of emotions going through this young woman's head as her profile was being traced, as she was being transferred to this next home."



(Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History)

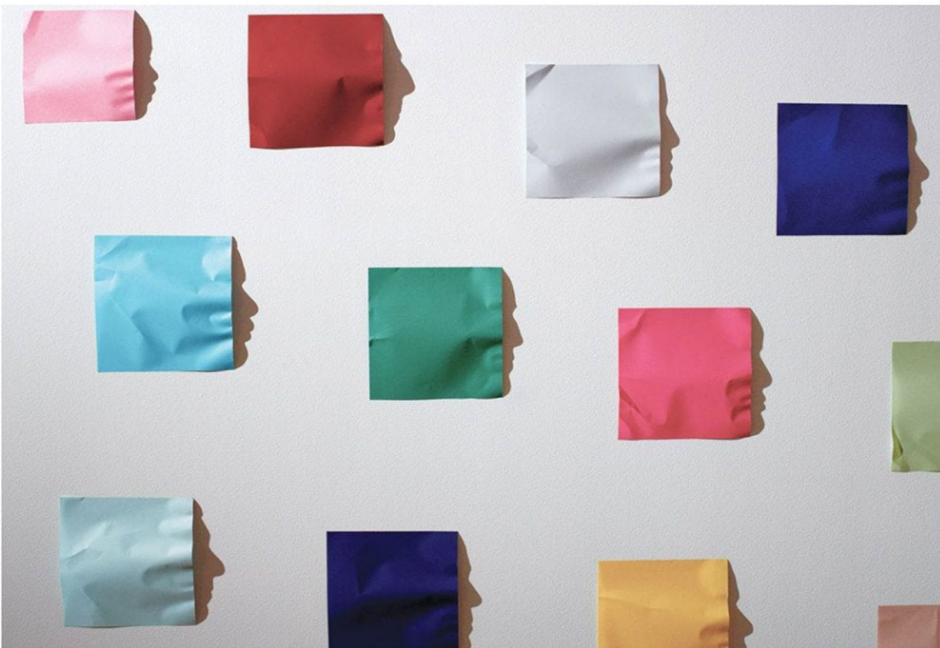
Double Silhouette: Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant (circa 1805-1815)

This portrait is one of the earliest known likenesses of a gay couple in the United States. Historical documents show that Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant were life partners who lived together for over 40 years. Braids of hair surround their silhouettes, forming a heart between them. "Think about it: If you were a same-sex couple living in Vermont in the 1800s, how could you have a portrait to show that you were a couple?" Naeem asks. "It's a token of love, and it's very personal."



Maibaum (2009)

The exhibit's contemporary art section includes an 18-foot-tall installation by Kristi Malakoff, who hand-cut black paper and foam core to portray 20 children in Victorian-era clothes dancing playfully around a maypole. The life-size piece conveys "the possibility of inanimate objects coming to life," as Malakoff says in "Black Out," a forthcoming book that serves as a companion piece to the exhibit and traces the history of the silhouette. (The book will be available for purchase at the museum when the exhibit opens.)



"Origami" (2017)

Kumi Yamashita "sculpted" her models' faces in shadow by making precise creases by hand on the edges of origami squares. They look like crumpled pieces of paper — until the viewer stands where the light hits, and unique profiles appear as shadows creeping out from each square. "Her work blew my mind," Naeem says. "These are shadows of real people who are not there."



“Precarious” (2018)

In this interactive digital installation created for the exhibit, Camille Utterback projects colorful shapes on a screen and uses an overhead tracking device to display an abstract, bird’s-eye view of onlookers. When viewers move, so do the shapes on the screen. The installation aims to upend the detachment we may feel as we sit at a computer or hold a smartphone. “When you see that you can only experience the work by moving, you quickly start to break down that digital alienation,” Naeem says.