



PEOPLE | Drawing with Scissors

In not much more time than it takes to point and shoot a camera or a cell phone, Lauren Muney studies a profile and snips a piece of paper to create an 18th-Century-style portrait.

In about two minutes, the self-taught silhouette artist proffers a likeness that often amazes her sitter. Customers ask her, "How do you cut and talk at the same time?" or "Are you really cutting this portrait without drawing it first?" or "Aren't you going to take my photo, create the silhouette from the photo, and send it to me in two weeks?"

Muney, proprietress of Silhouettes By Hand, considers herself a demonstrating artisan rather than a re-enactor, although for historical events she stays true to how silhouette artists worked in the late 18th and 19th centuries—traveling, dressing in period attire, and creating her art the same way. She also travels widely to share her art at corporate events.

Before the invention of photography, most people—if they could afford any likeness—would own a paper profile. At the time, silhouette artists cut profiles freehand during live sittings using only scissors. They described their work as "cut with common scissors without drawing or machine" to assure customers that they did not draw out the portrait before cutting it in paper, Muney explained.

Few artists had the skill to do freehand cutting, then or now, she noted, and the invention of various mechanical devices in the early 1800s that helped trace and cut silhouettes enabled unskilled "artists" to travel to fill portrait orders. For instance, the Peale family of painters installed face-tracing machines in their museums in Philadelphia and Baltimore to allow visitors to take home their likeness.

"Many people don't believe that an artist can create anything live, on



Dressed in 18th-Century attire, Lauren Muney cuts a silhouette for a woman attending the annual spring Dover Days Festival, a city-wide celebration of Delaware's capital city, founded in 1683 by William Penn.

site," Muney said, a perception she strives to alter by demonstrating the art at living history events and museum programs around the country.

"I provide as much interpretation as my guests can tolerate," she said. Before and during a sitting she briefly explains that the art form is a precursor to photography and asks her sitter to imagine what it would be like if a silhouette were the only portrait he or she might ever own.

Historical-style signage and silhouettes of famous faces such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson arrayed on her display table offer visual aids for those waiting to take their turn in her chair.

"My whole effort about cutting

silhouettes is to help people enjoy their own history and to take home 'their historical face,'" she said.

Although she holds an art degree and has been cutting silhouettes for about eight years, Muney feels she's constantly learning. "It took a year before I felt I wouldn't completely offend someone. I'm still progressing—I can see differences from silhouettes I cut just a few months ago."

A significant element of her education was discovering physiognomy, the theory that you could identify an individual's character by observing his or her physical features. Greek philosopher Aristotle first postulated it, and Italian scholar Giambattista della Porta expanded upon it in the early 1600s.



Directory artisan Lauren Muney lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

In the late 1700s, Johann Caspar Lavater, a Swiss theologian, poet, and writer, summarized his observations on silhouettes, portraiture, and proportions in his best-selling book, *Essays on Physiognomy*. The book included instructions for reading a face broken down into its major parts—eyes, brows, mouth, and nose.

"I got better at cutting silhouettes after learning about physiognomy—the curves, angles, and length of faces," Muney said. "Physiognomy was commonplace during the period. There were booklets you could carry with you to judge people on the street."

Muney's favorite subjects are those who have something unusual about their features, because the profiles she creates will almost always look like them—"think Alfred Hitchcock or Richard Nixon."

She considers a profile a mistake if she doesn't think it looks enough like the sitter, say if the forehead is too short. "I will know within half a second and I'll stop, crumple up the paper, and start again."

Her customers are usually delighted with their finished portraits.

"Some modern silhouette artists want to focus on re-enactment, but my favorite events help guests see and participate in live history," Muney said. "I like showing people something that's lost but fascinating." +

Editor's note: Physiognomy, viewed as a rational science in its historical context, has been disproven by multiple studies.

