
Silhouette: the Art of the Shadow, by Emma Rutherford, traces the lineage of the silhouette as a form of portraiture from ancient Greece to the present, focusing on its role within British and American arts, crafts and design. Exploring the history of a technique that defies categorization, Rutherford shows that the silhouette does not easily lend itself to the either/or labels of art versus craft, high-brow versus low-brow, domestic activity versus public entertainment. Rutherford paints the image of an art form that has been practiced for centuries both in private and public spheres by craftspeople and artists, common and royal households, children and adults.

The author breaks down her general history of the silhouette into five easily digestible chapters. Thorough attention is given to the technical and socio-historical developments of the art form from the time leading up to its golden age during the eighteenth century to its decline upon the advent of photography in the nineteenth century. Ample illustrations throughout the book provide a visual feast while corresponding chronologically to the various techniques and media discussed. The final chapter is brief and fails to provide for readers the extent to which the silhouette influenced art and design from the turn of the twentieth century to the present. However, Rutherford discusses at some length the work of Kara Walker, who is known for having turned the historical art form of the silhouette on its head, resuscitating it with challenging themes and glorious aesthetic qualities.

With Silhouette, Rutherford adds to the literature on an under-represented and under-respected art form that is cousin to portrait miniatures and portrait photography. There are few general histories on the silhouette, and a contemporary one is most welcome.

Lavishly illustrated and well-designed, Silhouette is an attractive publication. The hardcover book appears to have been made with durability in mind. Comprised of high quality paper and sewn signatures, the spine of the text block is glued to the spine of the cover.

Silhouette: The Art of the Shadow is recommended for library collections supporting both undergraduate and graduate research in studio arts and design, art history and the decorative arts. Scholarly researchers will find no notes or index for this publication, but will appreciate the well-documented images and bibliography.

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