

SHADES OF OUR ANCESTORS

AMERICAN PROFILES AND PROFILISTS

Univ. of
CALIFORNIA

BY

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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ABSTRACT

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THE PROFILES OF WILLIAM BACHE

If ever again I rail against the many letters that fall to my lot to answer, may I forever lose my collector's luck! Because it was the chance of two little notes, written by his descendants, that led me on rather a winding road to the scrapbook of William Bache, one of my favorite American silhouettists. For years I had loved his delicate, characteristic work; rejoiced in the cutting of a charming, unknown lady who graced my walls, but of the profilist himself I knew very little except that his first name was William, and that he had spent some time in Salem, where a number of his finest shades remain to delight us in the Essex Institute.

In her pleasant little book, *Wax Portraits and Silhouettes*, Ethel Stanwood Bolton writes, "Of Bache little is known; on the silhouette of George Wythe of Virginia, cut in 1804 for Jefferson, Mr. Hart found his Christian name. He cut by mechanical means, and probably with the same kind of machine that Peale used. He marked his portraits with a stamp which reads 'Bache's Patent.' " Any lover of old profiles, therefore, can understand my delight at visiting his great-great-niece, Mrs. C. R. Converse, of Elmira, New York; at hearing all about him (not just dry-as-dust facts, but real family history),

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and at turning the pages of this century-old treasure-trove of nearly two thousand shadow portraits. Of finding not only the duplicate of Chancellor Wythe's bust, but the silhouettes of George and Martha Washington; of Mrs. Lawrence Lewis (Nelly Custis), Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Randolph, Jefferson's successor as Secretary of State under Washington, and hundreds of other profiles of everyday people, less well known, but equally well cut; all of them vivid and interesting.

Their maker, William Bache, was born on December 22, 1771, at Bromsgrove, a small town in Worcestershire, England, and, when he was twenty-two, he came to Philadelphia, where one of his older kinsmen, Richard Bache, who married Sally Franklin, was already settled. He seems to have established himself almost at once as a cutter of profiles, beginning his career in Philadelphia; then, as every proper profilist should, wandering farther afield — first through the South, later to the West Indies. After his travels he returned again to Philadelphia, where in 1811 he was married to Miss Anna Page. Soon afterward he and his wife went to visit an old friend of his, John Norris, who was at that time greatly interested in founding the town of Wellsboro. Many inducements were offered to emigrants, and in 1812 Bache decided to cast in his lot with the other pioneers in western Pennsylvania, then very sparsely populated. He bought large tracts of land, and, as there were then no shops of any sort, he immediately built a "general store," and became one of the first merchants of the place. Every-

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thing in those days had to be bought in Philadelphia, a weary journey away, and hauled overland by ox teams. Also men, women, and children alike worked with their hands; there could be no idlers in a frontier town; harvests were sown and reaped; houses and barns were "raised" by neighborly coöperation; and it was in this way that the accident happened that put an end to Bache's silhouette-cutting except for his own amusement. While he was helping a friend to chop a supply of fuel, a tree crashed down upon him, and his right arm had to be amputated. Luckily, however, he was not at all dependent upon profiles for a livelihood; he was a solid citizen; his business thrived apace, and in 1822 Return Jonathan Meigs, then Postmaster General, appointed William Bache postmaster of Wellsboro, an office he held until his death in 1845.

In a local history, Josiah Emery, a Wellsboro schoolmaster, has left us some interesting personal facts about Bache. "When I came there Mr. William Bache was postmaster, and the office was kept in his dwelling, the tall log house standing where John N. Bache's house now stands. Mr. Bache was a man of strong common sense, well read and with more than ordinary ability. He had a scientific and inquiring turn of mind, was a great lover of Nature, and had a quick and appreciative sense of the ludicrous." Josiah Emery goes on, "He always preserved the character of a Christian, and though manufacturing whiskey for others, he drank but little himself." Still, this was no matter of reproach a

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hundred years ago; in fact, especially on national holidays, if a man were "overset," he would merely apologize to the company for his little mishap, and hope they would forgive him; adding he was sure the Lord would, "for He knew very well it was the Fourth of July." A human and sympathetic age!

I could add another virtue to Josiah Emery's long list — for as a profilist Bache was modesty itself. Usually silhouette advertisements are headed by staring black busts, followed by appeals to the citizens, and general laudations of the cutters themselves, their tools, and all their works. I am glad to have it so; they are the easier to find. Bache, from his very reticence, is most difficult to discover, tangled as his small notices are in a printed maze of sarcenets and Harvard College lotteries, muscovado sugar, and lost moses boats. One appeared in the *Salem Gazette*, September 16, 1808: "W. Bache returns his grateful acknowledgements to the Ladies and Gentlemen of Salem, for their liberal encouragement he has received, and begs leave to inform those who yet intend to have their *Profiles* drawn, that he proposes leaving this place the ensuing week."

Two years later he returned to Salem, where, except for the scrapbook, most of his best work survives. Both the *Essex Register* and the *Salem Gazette* on July 10, 1810, printed the following notice: —

PROFILE LIKENESSES

Mr. Bache has the honor to inform the ladies and gentlemen of Salem of his return to town, and respectfully offers

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to them his services in the line of his profession, at his room over Mr. Daniel Jenks' store. He invites their attention to a much improved style of

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on a fine vellum paper; and begs leave to introduce his friend, Mr. Nixon, who colors profiles in miniature style, and warrents as good a likeness for *two* dollars as could be obtained for *twenty*.

It may be that this marks the beginning of his more elaborated manner which we to-day admire so much; those engaging shades embellished with soft curls painted in India ink, and the high lights of ruffles and stocks touched in with Chinese white. A Connecticut advertisement of approximately the same date gives us the name of his patent machine; he may have borrowed it from Saint-Mémin who first popularized it in this country.

PROFILES

The subscribers respectfully inform the ladies and gentlemen of New-Haven, that they have taken a room for a short time at Mr. Eld's near the Church, in Church-Street, where they propose cutting, shading and painting Profile Likenesses in a new and elegant style. From their long experience and great success in business, and aided by an improved patent Physiognotrace, the subscribers feel confident of rendering general satisfaction to those who may favor them with their patronage.

W. BACHE
T. NIXON

But was it the Hartford *American Mercury* that printed an earlier notice of Bache's work, before he joined partnership with Nixon? Tucked away in the scrap-book, Mrs. Converse found a little twisted-over note, written in a very flowing and feminine hand, which read, "Miss McBreed having seen in the *Mercury* Mr.

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Bache's attendance upon Ladies for the purpose of cutting Profiles requests he will attend her whither her servants will direct him." Oh, soft, forgotten phrases! Was Miss McBreedy as charming as her note, and did her pretty profile linger in William Bache's memory so pleasantly that he could not bear to throw her letter away?

It is the only one left, although the album yielded also a tantalizingly torn scrap of yellowed paper with these words written on it: —

George Wa
the Shadow
for the Washin
their being str
personal know.

It must, I think, refer to the silhouettes Bache cut of General and Mrs. Washington, those first stately shadows in the scrapbook, leading, as they should, the long line of people dead and gone years ago: Nelly Custis, Mrs. Bushrod Washington, Chancellor Wythe, Randolph, Jefferson, and the rest. They could not all have been taken at the same time. We know from Charles Henry Hart's investigations that Wythe's profile was made in 1804; Nelly Custis's coiffure seems a trifle later than the modes of 1799, the year that she was married and that George Washington died, and of course his silhouette, if done from life, must have been cut then or earlier or not at all, since 1799 was the year when the whole country was plunged into deepest mourning for our first president.



SIX SILHOUETTES FROM WILLIAM BACHE'S SCRAPBOOK. COURTESY OF MRS. C. R. CONVERSE
GEORGE WASHINGTON MARTHA WASHINGTON MRS. LAWRENCE LEWIS (NELLY CUSTIS)
CHANCELLOR WYTHE THOMAS JEFFERSON EDMUND RANDOLPH

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What I am really trying to discover is if Bache could have cut the bust of Washington that William Henry Brown used as the frontispiece of his *Portrait Gallery of Distinguished American Citizens*, and that I have borrowed for my book. It is more like his work than that of any other profilist; Vallée painted Washington's head in India ink, the Peale bust was cut in Philadelphia in 1794, but this was taken by machine at Alexandria, and Bache was known to have been in the South at that date. I quote Brown's own words: "The author would also observe that the 'well-beloved' features in the frontispiece of the Father of his Country, is an exact copy of an original in his possession. The latter was presented to him under peculiar circumstances by one who was present when it was taken in 1798, and who received it from Washington's own hands. In this instance alone has the author varied from the design to compose his work exclusively of originals. But the authenticity of the likeness, and the veneration that hallows the name of that glorious patriot, caused the author to precede the likenesses of the great and prominent in our own day, by the semblance of that 'God-like man.' I received it from an old lady whose son had been drowned, and of whom I took a likeness after the body was found, which was so striking that it gave great satisfaction to the mother, who, in return, presented me with the profile of Washington. It was taken by a machine in Alexandria, on the General's visit to that city to deposit his vote at an election, and was given to her, then a girl, by the

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General's own hand, and has been highly prized by her, and never would be parted with but in return for the great favor I had done her in bringing to her mind the image of her dead son." I do not maintain that this is definitely Bache's work, but I do insist that there is a strong resemblance to his style, and a moderate certainty that it may have been cut by his machine.

He seems to have journeyed leisurely through the South; indeed, travel could not have been compassed after any other fashion in those far-away stagecoach, horseback days. He silhouetted Claiborne, afterward Governor of Louisiana, and he must have remained for a long stay in this beautiful part of the world, judging from the number of Creole names that appear in the list. Some of them are quite charming: Margaritte Navarre (a queenly title!), Celestine Trudiau, Hilaire Courcelle, Manon Montagut. Later — I suppose this means the West Indies — you observe a Spanish influence: Dr. Joaquin Alameda, Don Antonio Fernandez, and the Marquis de Castro Calvo, a high-nosed gentleman with a queue, not anywhere near so romantic-looking as he sounds. For the first time I found myself dissatisfied with my adored William Bache; the costumes then were so interesting that I wish he had worked in whole length, recorded more than the simple bust. He has left several examples of the exaggerated heads of *incroyables* with their sweeping hats, those absurd late-eighteenth-century Republican dandies who wore green coats and white waistcoats, and in their amazing collars and

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huge cravats fancied themselves the height of the English fashion. Oh, that I might have beheld their shadows strutting! Or the *merveilleuses*, their feminine counterparts, in muslin gowns slit long to show trim buskins, gowns so thin and flimsy that, as one captious critic grumbled, "in a single year, eighteen ladies caught fire, and eighteen thousand caught cold!" From the flowers sprigging their caps and headdresses I am convinced they would have shown neat ankles.

It is somewhat surprising to collectors who have thought of William Bache's silhouette work as almost entirely hollow-cut to find that the scrapbook is composed chiefly of the cut-and-pasted type; nineteen hundred and thirty-six, to be exact. There are, besides, nineteen painted, nine hollow-cut, and one "hole in the doughnut." The profiles his advertisement referred to as "shaded and painted" may, as I wrote, have been in a later manner, although, if he did take the Washington shade owned by Brown, he must, occasionally at least, have worked after this fashion much earlier than 1809-10. I am the more persuaded of this because, of the two heads he did of himself, the younger countenance is in this style; his profile as a middle-aged man is cut and pasted. Another new fact which his album revealed was that he cut in miniature; his silhouette sizes vary from the four-inch bust of Felix Gremaux, an elderly, pompous incroyable, to the profile of a pretty young woman which measures an inch and a quarter. But the general average is about three inches. Some of these

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miniature profiles are numbered, but not named; there is nothing to reveal their identity, or to tell where they were taken.

It is his elaborated work, though, which is most attractive, and while Bache here usually expressed himself in the hollow-cut method, touching in the high lights of his background, he also painted his profiles and shaded them with a delicate charm. His portrait of Leverett Saltonstall, in the Essex Institute, is a very fine instance of this medium, and, unlike the other painted profiles in the Institute collection, it is not signed, but is stamped with his characteristic mark, a five-eighths-inch oval impression with "Bache" above, "Patent" below, rosettes in each corner, and three minute roses in the centre. The Saltonstall bust is painted on a white card, the hair so fine and shadowy as to suggest Miers's early work, and the details of lapel, stock, and buttons are indicated with an almost dusky blue effect. The other painted profiles are signed "Bache"; both are very attractive, the woman's head particularly so, with soft ringlets falling on her forehead, and the gossamer-fine adornment of a lace-ruffled muslin tucker.¹ The Connecticut Historical Society owns two of these painted shades, both signed; there are two more in the possession of the Rhode Island Historical Society, but the one in the Glenn Tilley Morse collection, like the Saltonstall portrait, is stamped. And among the nine painted profiles in Bache's scrap-book there is a most unusual double head, a man and

¹On Dr. Barnard's hollow-cut profile in the Essex Institute collection is the signature "Bache," plus the word "exec.," the only instance I have seen of this.

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his wife, painted, of course, in India ink, then shaded with Chinese white, while, never before seen in his profiles, there are brownish glints in the hair and on the man's coat. The costumes are of the full Empire period, and although I do not consider it the best of Bache's shadow-making, still it is sufficiently rare and desirable for me to feel a little pang in knowing it can never be mine.

But I solace myself with four admirable Bache's, three of them given me directly from the album, and doubly valuable on that account. Two are hollow-cut, and since they are unbacked I shall never know whether he meant to trim them with anything more than the India-ink curls. I wonder if in addition to his other human and lovable qualities he had an eye for a pretty woman? I will not say that none of his subjects are plain, simply that most of them are very alluring; I have seen no sweeter profile than this young girl's head with its tip-tilted nose and fringe of artless curls. I think I shall set her against black velvet; its dusky softness would fall in becomingly with her gentle charms.

Of course I should not have grieved if her background had been shaded by Bache with those delicate, filmy touches which, in certain lights, show a decided tinge of blue. He is the only profilist who, working in the hollow-cut method, painted his paper backings, and expressed the details of dress with a skill at once fastidious and accurate. Doyle, Peale, and Williams all occasionally added inked or penciled coiffures; sometimes unskill-

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fully, again with real taste; William King kept his profiles severely black and unadorned; so did Everet Howard and T. Banton, and a host of the lesser silhouettists. It remained for Bache to discover and employ this unique and delightful method, in which, apparently, he had no imitators.

Of T. Nixon I know very little beyond the fact that in 1809-10 he was Bache's partner, and that his colored profiles in miniature style do not approach the artistry of his collaborator's work. Really, collaborator is a bad word to use; the style of each man is so dissimilar that it is impossible they should have joined forces for more than a studio companionship; Nixon could n't have done Bache's profiles; Bache would n't have done Nixon's. All of Nixon's profiles that I have had the opportunity of examining are well colored, but woody; they have nothing of Bache's subtle grace and distinction. The ones I have chosen for illustration belong to the Rhode Island Historical Society, which, very fortunately, owns two more; Nixon is a much rarer name than Bache. There is a fifth at the American Antiquarian Society at Worcester, while Mr. Morse owns the sixth that I have seen. On the reverse side of the unframed profile at the Antiquarian Society appears the information that he was a printer. I cannot substantiate this fact; I merely give it for what it is worth, but as profilists always had their busy fingers in many pies, it is very likely true.

Mrs. Converse, Bache's niece and the owner of his

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scrapbook, knew nothing of Nixon or his work or his partnership with her uncle. His profiles do not assure me that he had a sense of humor, but I may be wrong, and perhaps some day another delver into the past will arise and tell us that T. Nixon shared not only Bache's studio but his many personal virtues of common sense, ingenuity, a witty tongue, and "the character of a Christian."