

“Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles”: Silhouettes and African American Identity in the Early Republic¹

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AN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY silhouette portrait made around 1803 and titled *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles*, was attributed in 1996 by the curators of the Library Company of Philadelphia to Raphaele Peale (fig.1). The portrait's existence, its physical characteristics, its inscription, even this recent attribution, raise compelling questions about identity, race, and authorship for the present-day viewer. The small, finely detailed portrait is formed by the layering of two pieces of paper: a white one out of which a profile form has been cut is laid over a black sheet to create a silhouetted profile. The meticulously cut edge defines the high brow of the subject's forehead; the tip of his nose; the lips pressed lightly together; and the high collared jacket. It forms an undulating hairline, with a long queue at the back. From between the jacket's lapels it becomes a scarf, one end of its bow jutting out into empty space. And while the carved white paper deftly creates physiological characteristics and costume details, the black stock upon which it rests seems to create a veil of darkness rather than to reveal a “truth” about the “identity” of the sitter.

By telling us the subject's name and occupation, the text written across the lower edge of the white paper, “Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles,” lifts a part of this veil. But at the same time the text adds to the mystery of the image itself. Who was Moses Williams and what significance did his occupation have in relation to his identity? How might we interpret the denotative and connotative meanings found within this image/text combination today? What do they tell us about the silhouette's ability to contain and communicate a specific sitter's identity? Specifically, how might the artist recreate the subject's race, gender, and

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FIGURE 1. Raphaelle Peale (attr.), *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles*, ca. 1803. White laid paper on black stock, 4 in. × 5 in. Library Company of Philadelphia.

class using such a minimalist mode? Further still, how might the silhouette’s conventions be troped by an artist to assert a self-fashioned identity, one that might stand in opposition to a dominant culture’s social prescriptions?

THE (EXTENDED) PEALE FAMILY

For many years Moses Williams (1777–ca.1825) was known to scholars only by a few references that constructed him as the one-time slave of Charles Willson Peale, a foremost painter, naturalist, and museum proprietor of the early republican period.² It has long been established

²This paper began in a graduate seminar led by Roger B. Stein in his capacity as Distinguished Visiting Professor of American Art and Culture at Stanford University during

through Peale's diary entries, letters, and assorted newspaper clippings that Williams was born and raised within his master's Philadelphia household, and that, after his manumission, he worked as a silhouette maker in Peale's Museum. Textually present yet physically invisible until 1996, he existed as a shadowy enigma for historians, what Toni Morrison might term an "Africanist presence" within the well-documented legacy of the Peale family. Recent scholarship, however, has sought to examine Williams's function within the museum and the impact of the silhouettes that he cut upon the visual culture of early-nineteenth-century Philadelphia. Through the foundational research and analysis presented in Ellen Fernandez Sacco's dissertation, "Spectacular Masculinities," and David Brigham's book, *Public Culture in the Early Republic*, we can now understand much more about Williams's life within the Peale household.³

Beginning in the 1760s, Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) fashioned for himself a career in the arts and natural sciences that was unparalleled in his day. In addition to painting portraits of such notables as George Washington, he maintained a museum that featured hundreds of taxidermied New World animals and ethnographic artifacts. He was active in the politics of the time and was a friend and correspondent of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and many other prominent figures of his era. With three different wives, he fathered seventeen children. While not all of them reached maturity, the ones who did tended to follow their father's example and his teachings by choosing work as visual artists, naturalists, and museologists.

the spring of 1998. I thank Professor Stein for all his help, encouragement, and continuing support. The ideas begun under his guidance were furthered after contact with Ellen Fernandez Sacco at the 1998 American Studies Association meeting in Seattle. I thank Dr. Sacco for her generosity in sharing valuable source material on Williams with me, including the subsequently cited articles by Rembrandt Peale and Frank Colliger. Dr. Sacco's scrupulously thorough research has been key to the illumination of this long-forgotten artist. An early version of this paper, "In the Shadow of the Peale Family," was given as a presentation as part of the panel, "Identity and the Limits of Representation," chaired by David Joselit and Richard Meyer, at the College Art Association Annual Meeting, February 1999. I would like to thank Professors Joselit and Meyer for their support and for giving me the opportunity to present. Last, I owe a great debt to Alexander Nemerov, my dissertation adviser, who shared with me his insights on art and identity in the early republican period while he was working on his recent book on the still life paintings of Raphaelle Peale.

For detailed information on Peale and his family there is a large body of scholarship including the recent museum exhibition catalogue, Lillian B. Miller, ed., *The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 1770–1870* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997).

³ Ellen Fernandez Sacco, "Spectacular Masculinities: The Museums of Peale, Baker, and Bowen in the Early Republic" (UMI, 1998), 48–74 and 110–12. David R. Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic: Peale's Museum and Its Audience* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

Like other citizens living in the mid-Atlantic states before and after the War of Independence, Peale owned slaves. While working in Annapolis, Maryland, between 1769 and 1775 he acquired a mixed-race slave couple named Scarborough and Lucy. It is believed that they came to him as payment for a portrait commissioned by a plantation owner in the area. He later moved his entire household to Philadelphia where, some ten years later, he emancipated the couple in 1786 under the Pennsylvania legislation for which he himself had lobbied. This law required the manumission of slaves over the age of twenty-eight, allowing Lucy and Scarborough to live as free, albeit second-class, citizens. Their eleven-year-old son, Moses, however, was still bound by law to remain in their former master's service until the occasion of his twenty-eighth birthday. This situation bound Williams and his family to the Peales, and tightened the stress that the “peculiar institution” of slavery put on life in the busy household.

Growing up apart from his natural parents, Moses Williams was functionally the “eighteenth child” of his master, and prevailing ideological attitudes prescribed that he would be treated as a child throughout his lifetime despite being freed a year early, in 1802, at the age of twenty-seven.⁴ Raised alongside the numerous Peale children, who by necessity were trained to be useful members of the museum's staff, Williams was instructed in taxidermy, animal husbandry, object display, and eventually the use of a silhouette-making machine, the physiognotrace.

At the time of its installation he was taught to operate this portrait-making device, but, unlike the other junior members of the Peale household, he was not taught the “higher art” of painting. This point is significant, for virtually all of Peale's immediate descendants were painters. This was perhaps for no other reason than that they had to live up to the names he had given them: Raphaele, Rembrandt, Angelica Kauffman, and Titian are among the best known. And while these white members of the household were given a full palette of colors with which to express themselves artistically, the slave was relegated to the mechanized blackness of the silhouette, and it effectively removed him from any significant artistic and financial competition with the others.

This situation reveals the complex nature of the elder Peale's control over artistic learning in his household and the role that slavery played within it. Rembrandt Peale (1778–1860), known for his vivid portraits, later recalled, “It is a curious fact that until the age of 27, Moses was entirely worthless: but on the invention of the Physiognotrace, he took a fancy to amuse himself in cutting out the rejected profiles

⁴Sacco, “Spectacular Masculinities,” 50–52, 60.

made by the machine, and soon acquired such dexterity and accuracy, that the machine was confided to his custody with the privilege of retaining the fee for drawing and cutting. This soon became so profitable, that my father insisted upon giving him his freedom one-year in advance. In a few years he amassed a fund sufficient to buy a two story brick house, and actually married my father's white cook, who during his bondage, would not permit him to eat at the same table with her."⁵ Rembrandt's rather unflattering "portrait" of Williams reveals some of the tension between him and his father's former slave, who was only six months his senior.

Rembrandt Peale and Moses Williams were unequal peers in a peculiar family relationship. As slave and son they were both under the control of their paterfamilias, and the role of the all-powerful head of household was one that the elder Peale, a proponent of the new nation's emulation of republican Rome, relished. Peale's overbearing and capricious paternal demeanor has been a topic of much recent study, including Phoebe Lloyd's provocative argument that he was negligent with his eldest son Raphaëlle's health by knowingly having him work with toxic materials during taxidermy projects.⁶

While there is no indication that Williams actually had a desire to paint, he may not have seen it as beyond the possibility of his racial status because of the close proximity of the African American painter Joshua Johnston or Johnson (active 1789–1825). It has been speculated that Johnston, who worked primarily in nearby Baltimore, received some formal training from several members of the Peale family, including Charles Willson, and Rembrandt, who was six months Williams's junior.⁷ However, the extent of Williams's contact with Johnston, or its possible impact upon him, is not yet known.

Further insight into the peculiar dynamics present in the Peale family, and the role that slavery played in them, may be gleaned from the way that Williams was mentioned by the elder Peale in letters to family members and close friends. For example, in an 1803 letter to Raphaëlle, who was then working in Virginia making silhouettes and painting portraits, Peale praises the work of his former slave: "I have just spoken to a Gentleman who says he was at your Room in Norfolk which was so crowded that he could not get his profiles. Moses has made him a good

⁵ Rembrandt Peale, "The Physiognotrace," *The Crayon* 4 (1857): 307–08.

⁶ Phoebe Lloyd, "Philadelphia Story," *Art in America* 76 (Nov. 1988): 154–71.

⁷ Carolyn J. Weekley et al., *Joshua Johnson, Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter* (Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Maryland Historical Society, Museum and Library of Maryland History, 1987) provides the most thorough and complete research on Johnston's life and presents a convincing argument for his connection to the Peales.

one, being from Carolina he did not at first relish having it done by a *Molatta*, however I convinced him that Moses could do it much better than I could.”⁸ In this anecdote there is a sense that Peale may have secretly enjoyed the discomfort that Moses’ race caused the sitter.

And in an 1808 letter to Rembrandt, then studying in Paris, the patriarch records the birth of Moses’ daughter in the same paragraph and sentence as the events of his natural children and grandchildren: “I have the agreeable intelligence to communicate of the (safe) recovery of your sisters Angelica’s health, and the birth of an other (Daughter) Son, after which she had a severe attack of bilious colick, Raphaelle has also another Son, and Moses a Daughter.”⁹ In this environment of blurred familial relations, attention to the slave may have been seen as a slight to the son. I would speculate that Rembrandt’s antipathy toward his father may have been redirected toward the easiest possible target, the former slave.¹⁰

MY MOLATTO MAN MOSES

The hegemonic language of American white supremacy has created designations for people of color that are not only derisive, but problematic as well. In a diary entry of 1799 Peale refers to Moses Williams as “my Molatto Man Moses,” in a manner quite similar to that found in the 1803 letter to Raphaelle.¹¹ In the term “Molatto,” estimations of color, blood quantum, and sub-human, equine origins seem to confront each other. The liminal racial identity that these words constructed for Moses Williams, his indentured status, his racially mixed heritage, and

⁸ Charles Willson Peale to Raphaelle Peale, 18 July 1803. *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, Lillian B. Miller, editor; Sidney Hart, assistant editor; Toby A. Appel, research historian (Published for the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983]), 542.

⁹ Charles Willson Peale to Rembrandt Peale, 11, 18 September 1808. *Ibid.*, 1138.

¹⁰ Other Peale children expressed whatever anxiety and anger they had regarding their father through different means. Raphaelle rejected the portraiture practice that his father would have had him do in favor of constructing highly personalized still life paintings. And Titian Ramsay Peale II, the youngest son, made a curious and imaginative drawing of his father’s severed head on the last page of a sketchbook (*Decapitation*, ca. 1822, Sketchbook 15c, 29r, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia). This image, which Kenneth Haltman claims to be an Oedipal projection in which the adult child fantasizes about his father’s gruesome death, is eerily similar to a silhouette in its profile orientation and dark cast shadow (Kenneth Haltman, “Titian Ramsay Peale’s Specimen Portraiture; or Natural History as Family History,” in Miller, *The Peale Family*, 191).

Sacco gives great attention to the role that Williams played in the museum, functioning both as a concessionaire and a racialized display (Sacco, “Spectacular Masculinities,” 71–72).

¹¹ Charles Willson Peale, Diary 17, Cape May, New Jersey, 30 May to 12 June 1799. Miller, 241.

FIGURE 2. Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822. Oil on canvas, 103.5 in. × 80 in. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

his conditional masculinity, caused him to be viewed as profoundly *other* within the public sphere of Philadelphia that defined American identity as decidedly *white*. Sacco argues that despite being a vital part of its workings, “Williams’s presence in the museum, as silhouette cutter, or, as sent out by Peale dressed as an Indian to pass out handbills for the exhibit of the mastodon in 1802, [put] Williams up for the same scrutiny as the displays—because it featured his subordinated status within a practice of visual order.”¹²

¹²Ellen Fernandez Sacco, “Racial Theory, Museum Practice: The Colored World of Charles Willson Peale,” *Museum Anthropology* 20.2 (1997): 28.

This “practice of visual order” is well illustrated by Peale’s emblematic self-portrait, *The Artist in His Museum* (1822, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) (fig. 2). Here, the elderly proprietor, still virile despite being toward the end of his life, lifts a curtain revealing the contents of the Longroom, the main exhibition space of the museum. On the left side of the composition, near the ceiling, are revealed portraits by him of “great white men.” Hierarchically arranged beneath them on the lower levels are various New World ethnographic artifacts and taxidermied animals. To the right is the partially visible skeleton of the mastodon excavated by the artist/naturalist a quarter of a century earlier from a marl pit in New York State. The painting is a visual biography of his life’s endeavor to create and control the production of meaning within a circumscribed space.¹³

This space was the stage upon which Williams played out his role as the *other*. In this performance of alterity he was not only dressed up as an Indian for advertising purposes, but he may also have been transformed in a painting attributed to Rembrandt Peale, *Man in a Feathered Helmet* (ca. 1805–13, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum)(fig. 3). Sacco suggests that in this painting the “light mulatto” may have been cast as the noble savage and masqueraded against an ethnographic black background as a Hawaiian chief. “A comparison of Williams’s profile, with that of the young man portrayed in the painting shows the same full mouth and broader jawline.” She states that through this presentation Williams has been taken out of history and environment and presented like other exhibits in the Longroom, a specimen within a hierarchical order in which the *other* was at the bottom.¹⁴ With an examination of *Man in a Feathered Helmet* it becomes clear that for Williams a concrete racial self-hood, unlike his professional identity, probably remained liminal throughout his life.

The costumed anonymity of this image is in direct contrast with the importance of Williams’s professional identity as a silhouette maker, which the discursive text on the front of the image asserts. This information is repeated on the back, but here it reads “Moses Williams, *the*

¹³Roger B. Stein, “Charles Willson Peale’s Expressive Design: The Artist in His Museum,” *Prospects: The Annual of American Cultural Studies* 6 (1981): 138–85. This piece is an exhaustive study of Peale’s process of creating an emblematic painting with specifically American sources. It offers a detailed look at the methodology behind the creations of the painting and the museum that is represented within its imaginary space.

¹⁴Sacco, “Spectacular Masculinities,” 110–12. Adrienne Kaeppler, in “Rembrandt Peale’s Ethnographic Still Life,” *Hawaiian Journal of History* 27 (1993): 227–38, noted that the painting “obviously did not depict a Hawaiian.” Sacco has deduced that because Williams was the correct age at the time of the painting and since he was already exoticized within the museum he was the most likely candidate.

FIGURE 3. Rembrandt Peale (attr.), *Man in a Feathered Helmet*, ca. 1805–13. Oil on canvas, 30.24 in. × 25.25 in. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Honolulu.

Cutter of Profiles” (emphasis mine), stating that the sitter’s professional identity as a specialist was of paramount importance. Although essentially giving the same information as that found on the front, the repetitive action of re-inscription doubles the importance of the subject’s “vocation” in the assessment of his identity, for it constitutes a social status democratically on par with those of other artisans, defining him as a skilled worker within his community. Further, I believe that the re-inscription may also function as a *signature*.

This profound act of naming staged beneath the profile of the artist and on the back of the mount may also be read in terms of the practice of naming Africans in America during the ante-bellum period. Africans newly arrived on the slave ships of the eighteenth century were given new names as they were sold into slavery. Only after manumission were slaves able to name themselves. This practice of self-naming may

be found in the case of Isabella Dumont, who as a free woman became Sojourner Truth. Truth appeared in a *carte-de-visite* from the 1860s, with the interesting caption “I sell the shadow to support the substance.” Here she is referring to the “shadow” as the image produced by photography. It is a statement that signifies upon the “currency of identity” that mechanical reproduction made possible in the nineteenth century. Through systems of multiple image-making, Truth was able to sell her identity in order to sustain its source. In this manner the ex-slave was able to achieve an ironic sort of control over the sale of the representation of her selfhood.¹⁵

A similar act of naming can be found in the case of Scarborough Peale, who became John Williams when he and his wife, Lucy, were freed in 1786.¹⁶ How and why John Williams chose his new name are unknown, but it is important to note that his son also took that last name when he was freed some sixteen years later. The first name of the son is important to consider as well. In the Bible, Moses is the one who is separated from his actual family and raised in the house of Pharaoh. Eventually, when he is confronted with his difference, his otherness, he is forced to make a critical choice not to ignore this shift in identity. At this point he is reborn when he assumes the life of a Hebrew slave in a newly racialized body. But it was his role as the one chosen by God to lead his people out of Egypt, from bondage to the promised land, that made his name a popular one for many African Americans to give their own children during slavery.

During the early nineteenth century, slaves went more often to another owner than they did into self-possession, and their names changed to suit the new owner’s preferences. According to the bill of sale dated 1796 and displayed under a homogenizing mat with the anonymously made silhouette of *Flora* (fig. 4), “Margaret Dwight of Milford in the County of New Haven and State of Connecticut sold Flora, a nineteen-year-old slave, to Asa Benjamin of Stratford in Fairfield County, Connecticut, for the sum of twenty-five pounds Sterling.”¹⁷ This extremely rare hand-drawn silhouette was made sometime before this sale, and we can see that Flora’s new last name has been appended on the lower right in a different hand. The repeated naming in three

¹⁵ Nell Irvin Painter’s *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996) contains an excellent discussion of Truth’s use of the *carte-de-visite* as a source of both self-definition and economic self-support; see the chapter “Truth in Photographs,” 185–99.

¹⁶ Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom, The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720–1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), chap. 2.

¹⁷ Didactic label that accompanies object in the catalogue of the 1990 exhibition by Janet Levine in Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710–1940* (Washington, D. C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990), 10.

FIGURE 4. Unidentified artist, *Flora*, 1796. Silhouette, cut paper and brown ink with bill of sale, 14 in. × 13 in., unsigned. The Stratford, Connecticut, Historical Society.

different places on the paper—“Floras profile,” “*Floras profile*,” “Flora Benjamin”—serves to control her identity in both the figural and the discursive fields. Flora’s silhouette was part of the documentation that her new owner kept on his purchase for identification purposes in case she ever ran away, and its mode of active surveillance is comparable to that of the contemporary police mug shot. This enigmatic profile is distinguished by the soft features of the face abruptly juxtaposed with the spiky, abstract rendering of hair. In its organic regularity it becomes like the petals of a flower, marking the visual and verbal amalgamation of “Flora” and “flower,” of woman and object. Her image, like a pressed blossom, is sandwiched into the two dimensions of the paper. And like flowers, one could also purchase slaves.

FIGURE 5. Moses Williams (attr.), *Mr. Shaw's blackman*, after 1802. White laid paper on black stock, 4 in. × 5 in. Library Company of Philadelphia.

Another rare silhouette of an African American is one that was recorded and inscribed at Peale's Museum as “Mr. Shaw's blackman,” and is attributed to Moses Williams (fig. 5). As David Brigham has recognized, it is a name that identifies the subject in relation to his master and his race; it creates his existence solely within the institution of slavery and his skin color.¹⁸ Without this identifying title the viewer might not otherwise know that this was a slave, or that he was dark-skinned. There is little in the image to indicate his race other than the slight fullness of his upper lip or the short wavy hair. Like the silhouette of Williams, the simple rendering of his clothes, an animated bit of necktie peeking out from a high collar jacket, seems to give little indication of his identity, but in this case, his costume must be read as livery,

¹⁸ Brigham, 71.

rather than merely contemporary clothing. The silhouette of *Mr. Shaw's blackman* is interesting to juxtapose with Charles Willson Peale's textual mode of racializing Williams's identity as "My Molatto Man Moses," described above.

THE PHYSIOGNOTRACE DEVICE

Williams's postcolonial role as a manumitted slave, working within the literal shadow of his former owner at Peale's Museum, is key to understanding the complex construction of his identity that *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles* presents. Central to this role was his assuming the concession of the physiognotrace device upon the occasion of his manumission at age twenty-seven, in 1802.¹⁹ This tool for image making was closely related to the polygraph machine that was owned by Thomas Jefferson, which was designed to make two copies of the same document at once.²⁰ While the polygraph was intended for making multiple documents, the physiognotrace was intended for making multiple images. And yet both came from the desire that their inventors, Sir John Isaac Hawkins and Charles Willson Peale, had for devising a way to propagate and control the production of visual and textual meaning.

As a mechanically mediated visual presentation, the portrait profiles made by the physiognotrace promised the nineteenth-century viewer a certain indexical primacy that other forms of image making could not. Like the photographic media that would eventually eclipse it, the physiognotrace produced what was viewed by many to be a pure act of mechanical mimesis, an image practically unaltered by human hands. But because hand-cutting was a necessary part of their creation, physiognotraced profiles also retained what Walter Benjamin would term an aura of individuality.²¹ Because of these factors the revolution

¹⁹ The physiognotrace was a machine created in the late 1790s by the English inventor John Isaac Hawkins. They were expensive to make, and only a few of them were used in the United States between 1802 and 1840. However, the operators of these devices, including Charles Fevret de Saint-Mémin, produced a huge number of images during this time. The Peale family of Philadelphia owned several. The one that was operated by Moses Williams under their auspices at the museum and maintained in the Longroom of Independence Hall was responsible for tracing as many as eight thousand profiles in one year (see Charles H. Elam, *The Peale Family: Three Generations of American Artists* [Detroit Institute of Arts and Wayne State University Press, 1967], 110).

²⁰ A demonstration of this machine at work may be seen during the opening credits of the recent film *Jefferson in Paris*.

²¹ This shift from an individual image to an infinitely reproducible generalization raises many issues about the silhouette's nature as sign. These issues are addressed by Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).

in portraiture that accompanied the physiognotrace device was in its time nearly as significant as the subsequent development of inexpensive photography was during the final third of the nineteenth century. Second, the physiognotrace silhouette retained a great deal of its “aura” because of the physical link between sitter and machine and cutter. All three were linked together via the prosthetic arm of the wooden tracer that was attached to the device.

The physiognotrace that Williams began operating at the museum in 1802 soon became one of the chief attractions for visitors. In its first years about 80 percent of attendees, as many as eight thousand a year, had their profiles made by Williams, at a cost of eight cents each.²² In 1805 Peale wrote to his partner Hawkins in England that “the Physiognotrace has done wonders, profiles are seen in nearly every house in the United States of America, never did any invention of making the likeness of men, meet so general approbation as this has done. . . . It would be too great a task for Mosis [*sic*] to write the Name on each. . . . However he shall give such names as he may think worthy of being known and remembered.”²³

The widespread colloquial use of these silhouettes can be seen in a genre painting by John Lewis Krimmel, an artist working during the period in Philadelphia and the surrounding area. In *Quilting Frolic* (1813, Henry Francis DuPont Winterthur Museum), portrait profiles are placed above the mantel and just beneath a mezzotint of the “Father of Our Country,” George Washington. The silhouettes, whose orientations echo those of faces found on Roman coins, are evidence of the neoclassical style in republican America. In Krimmel’s image they function as classicizing icons for the ancestors of the new republicans who cavort in front of them.

Part of the problem with researching nineteenth-century silhouettes is that we often do not know who made them. A handful of other portrait profile artists besides Williams and the Peales were working on the eastern seaboard in the 1810s and 1820s. Collectively they produced tens of thousands of these small images, which measure about four by five inches. The established method for attributing these images, according to Alice Van Leer Carrick, author of *American Silhouettes: A Collector’s Guide*, is that those made at Peale’s Museum generally bear the embossment “Museum,” while those made by Raphaele in his independent practice are marked “Peale.” While the designation

²² Brigham, 70.

²³ Charles Willson Peale to John Isaac Hawkins, 17, 22, 25 December 1805 (*Peale Papers*, 916).

“Museum” must be read as having subsumed the practice of Williams within it, it would also include profiles by Charles Willson Peale, or even by people who opted to save the eight-cent operator’s fee by paying only for the paper, and making their own. Further, there are certain stylistic details that link these profiles, such as ink-drawn curls on the head of a female sitter, or the way a lock of hair falls over the forehead of the man. In the absence of an embossment, those details help to identify them as Peale silhouettes. But whether a silhouette has “Museum” or “Peale” embossed across its lower edge is not a concrete designation of its authorship, just of its originary site within the realm of the Peale family. As a result of such ambiguities, there are a reasonable number of silhouettes attributed to members of the Peale family that bear no embossment, and *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles* is one of these. These factors provide us with reasonable doubt as to the “true authorship” of this image. It is not necessarily by Raphaele Peale; it may have been the product of collaboration on the part of the two men or, as I would suggest, it may instead be a self-portrait by Moses Williams.

Imagine for a moment, if you will, the scene of this image’s creation. Moses Williams enters the Longroom of the museum. Walking to the end, where the physiognotrace was located, he takes a piece of paper, folds it twice so that four copies will be made, and inserts it into the top of the machine. He sits beneath the device, adjusting his posture to fit his head within the arch at the bottom. Then, using one hand he begins to guide the dowel over the features of his face. Chin, nose, eyes, and forehead all glide easily beneath it. The hinges of the machine, which articulate its drawing arm, act to reduce his features onto the small square of paper tacked to the top of the board. The front half of his head now drawn, he attempts to extend the reach of his arm so that it may guide the dowel over his hair and down his back. It is a difficult thing to accomplish, and the line that he achieves in this second half of the image is much choppier and rougher than in the first. The tracing of the profile now complete, Williams removes the paper and begins cutting it out. He doesn’t like some of what he sees, so he corrects it to his preference. Then, using a quill and ink, he adds the finishing touch of an arching eyelash and, perhaps, he writes his name and occupation at the bottom.

In *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles*, certain discrepancies reveal both what was ignored and what was embellished during this artistic process. On the white laid paper embossed pentimenti from the machine’s trace-line appear prominently in the areas of the queue and the necktie, making a record of what was mechanically “seen” by the device. There is a significant deviation of the cut-line from this path that indicates what was changed by the artist during the cutting process.

Here, the remaining trace-lines reveal that the “cutter” altered the length of the hair by extending it nearly one centimeter from the original trace line, causing it to lie closer to the head. In concert with a stylized lock curling over the forehead, the altered hair follows a smoother, more flowing line.

Although the rounded nose and full lips of Williams’s African blood remain to dominate his facial features, the European part of his “Molatto” identity crowns him in the form of long, straight hair. In comparison to the staccato waves of *Mr. Shaw’s blackman*, or the nappy peaks of *Flora*, it is decidedly anglicized. By deviating from the original form line, I believe that Moses Williams purposely created an image in which his own features would connote tropes of whiteness rather than blackness. But was it an attempt to deny the African part of his racial heritage? I would argue that it records the anxiety and confusion that he had about his position as a person of mixed race within a white society that despised that heritage. As a newly freed man he needed to create an identity for himself and he had to do it with the tools that he had been given. In this way *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles* both creates and obscures its subject’s identity by signifyin’(g) and subsuming him beneath the appellation “Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles.”

Recall the kindred relationship between the physiognotrace and the polygraph devices. In the same manner that Thomas Jefferson produced multiple copies of his writings on the polygraph, so too did Williams inscribe a visual record of his identity using the physiognotrace. It was a related act of writing. Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues in *The Signifying Monkey* that, within the African American literary tradition, “to rename is to revise, and to revise is to signify.”²⁴ In this act of re-drawing, which I read as kin to that of renaming or revising, we can see Williams signifyin’(g) upon his own profile. Rather than letting the traced image remain as the machine—a machine that, it is important to remember, was invented by one of his owner’s cronies—rather than letting the traced image remain as the machine had recorded it, he went back into it and revised it with his scissors. As they cut into the paper, Williams wrote his own story upon the one produced by the mechanical conception of his enslavers. Through this act he achieved agency over a small part of his representation within the public sphere. That this act comes around 1803, at the beginning of his career, shows both his interest in fitting into the artisanal society of Philadelphia and his

²⁴Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxiii.

ability to manipulate and defy its tenets. His marriage to the Peales' white cook, Maria, further indicates this ability, and the disappearance of their daughter from history, most probably by passing for white, shows the legacy of the father's own search for identity within a racialized selfhood.

And yet, despite the agency that one might project into this account of Moses Williams's life, it was a waning silhouette business, the basic economic problem of an over-saturated market, that may have ended his career. A half century after Moses Williams began his artistic practice as a cutter of profiles, *Philadelphia Daily News* columnist Frank Colliger wrote under his "Recollections of the Past" byline that "Moses Williams, a light mulatto man, was brought up in the family of the elder Mr. Peale. He was, as many old folks may recollect, a pleasant, witty, as well as an expert fellow in his vocation; but as his employment gradually declined, even so did Moses, and his finale hastened by too liberal use of the 'social glass.'"²⁵ Peale correspondence from the summer of 1823 confirms that Williams was forced to sell the property that his initial professional success had enabled him to buy.²⁶ Unlike Rembrandt and Raphaelle, who could paint all manner of portraits, still life, or whatever else the market demanded, Williams's artistic flexibility was as limited as the black and white of the paper media with which he worked. At the time of his manumission, Williams had assumed the professional identity that was provided for him by his owner. But when this career failed he lost the primary thing that had represented his freedom and independence: his ability to signify. Without his professional identity as "the cutter of profiles," Williams's taking of the social glass, his drinking, increased, and he descended into insolvency. Divested of property and without means to support himself, he was simply Mr. Peale's "Mulatto Man Moses," a thing that he clearly did not want to be.

EPILOGUE

The nineteenth-century artistic practice of Moses Williams demonstrates the tradition of signifyin'(g) as it may have been applied by an African American artist who chose to trope the conventions of the silhouette mode. It becomes clear that Moses Williams had a certain

²⁵ Frank Colliger, "Peale's Philadelphia Museum, & c.," *Philadelphia Daily News* undated clipping in Poulson's Scrapbook of Philadelphia History, vol. 8, pp. 18–24. Collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

²⁶ Sacco, "Spectacular Masculinities," 51.

amount of agency and control over his artistic practice and that his signifyin'(g) upon the line of his self-portrait was one of the ways he showed this ability. Regardless of whether his alterations were “good” or “bad,” they were his.

While works of art by other Peale family members have been studied in detail over the last two centuries, this silhouette of Williams was “rediscovered” less than five years ago by the Library Company of Philadelphia, although it had been in their collection since the 1850s. When the curators attributed this image to Raphaele Peale, although it does not bear his signature or embossment, they participated in the two hundred years of scholarly obfuscation of Williams’s artistic contribution to American art history, by denying the possibility that it might be a self-portrait. Is it too much to imagine that Williams’s own voice might be found within what at first might seem to be impenetrable blackness? A voice that signified upon a specific visual form and through an active and revisionary process made it its own. It demonstrates the artist’s own agency in the visualization of his selfhood; it was his way to subvert the negation of voice that blackness connoted during slavery.²⁷

²⁷ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Slave’s Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), xxvi–xxxii.