

SHADOWS ON THE WALL

CANDLE-LIGHT AMUSEMENTS

Lester Smith

GOING BACK IN TIME, perhaps even by thousands of years, shadows of faces could be cast onto a wall or sheet of paper by the means of rushlights or candles, and the outline could then be marked round to form a record or keepsake of a person. In Victorian days, as well as today at popular resorts and fairs, silhouettes could be cut in a matter of minutes by an expert from a piece of black paper, to represent the profile of a friend or family member that could later be stuck into the family album. It was also possible to buy pre-cut silhouettes of royalty and other famous people to add importance to the family album. In the 18th and 19th centuries, before the advent of photography, these were the cheapest form of likenesses available, very much cheaper than portrait painting.

A variation on the silhouette was the 'White Shadow'. If a silhouette can be considered as the 'black shadow' produced by a person or object, then a 'white shadow' is an image projected by light of varying intensities to form a greyscale image of that person or object. There is perhaps an analogy here to the 'negative' and 'positive' of a photograph.

White shadows consisted of a sheet of thin white card, cut to represent a portrait (Fig. 1) – mostly full face but occasionally three-quarter or profile views. Full height

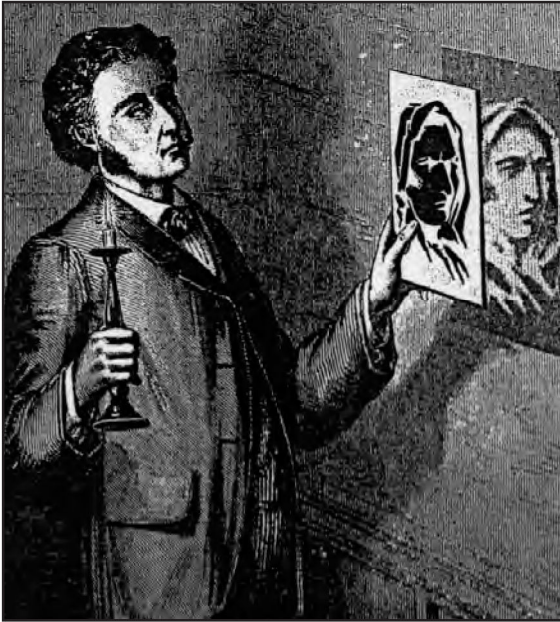


1. Hand-cut white shadow image, 'Bonaparte when 33 years of age', undated, but Napoléon Bonaparte was 33 years old in 1802 (all images from the Lester Smith Collection)



2. Full-figure white shadow image of the great Italian violinist Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840)

figures (Fig. 2) and scenes were also produced. Strategic parts of the card were removed to define the face or picture, and as few as two or three cut-outs could be enough to produce a lifelike image. The piece of card would not look too impressive at first, but when a light (preferably a candle) was put behind it, some 4 or 5 feet away from a light-coloured wall, the light and shadow thrown by the cut-

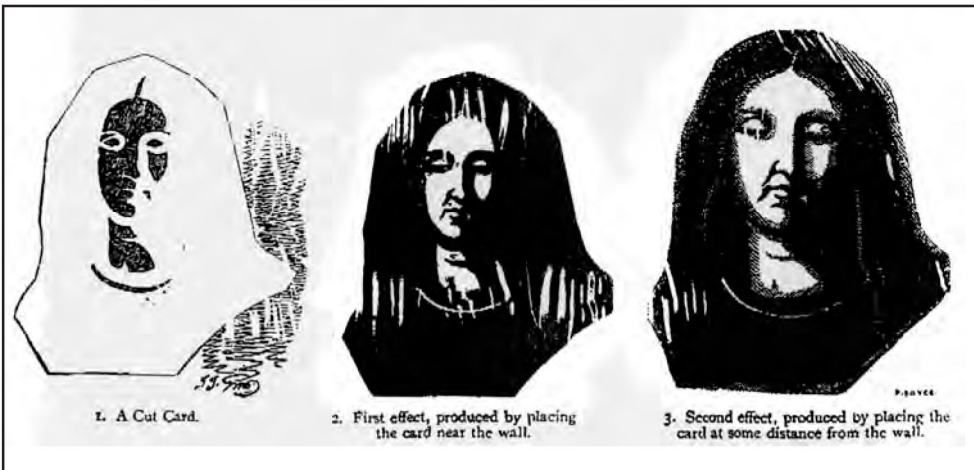


3. Contemporary engraving demonstrating the use of a white shadow card with a candle for illumination



4. 'A fierce lion on the wall' (engraving reproduced, with thanks, from Jac and Pascale Remise and Regis van de Walle, *Magie lumineuse: du théâtre d'ombres à la lanterne magique* (Paris: Balland, 1979))

out sections would make the image instantly recognisable (Figs 3–4). If the card was too close to the wall the image would be too sharp; too far away it would be very shadowy. But at the right distance the balance between the black, greys and white would produce a soft and perfect likeness (Fig. 5).



5. Demonstration of the white shadow effect



far left:
6. William Shakespeare. The handwritten caption reads 'Come like shadows, so depart [a quotation from Macbeth] – This Cardboard Exhibits [sic] by its Shadows a likeness of the Immortal Bard'.



left
7. Courting couple, identified as Miss Sarah Trower and her 'beau'

The subjects were mostly of notables like Shakespeare (Fig. 6) or the Duke of Wellington (1769–1852), actors such as Edmund Kean (1787–1833) or John Kemble (1757–1823), politicians, kings and queens, and Christ or the Virgin Mary. Other popular subjects were portraits of couples (Fig. 7), with one partner giving a shadow image to the other as a Valentine or birthday gift. These were often



8. Unidentified dog – the paper is conveniently watermarked with the year 1821

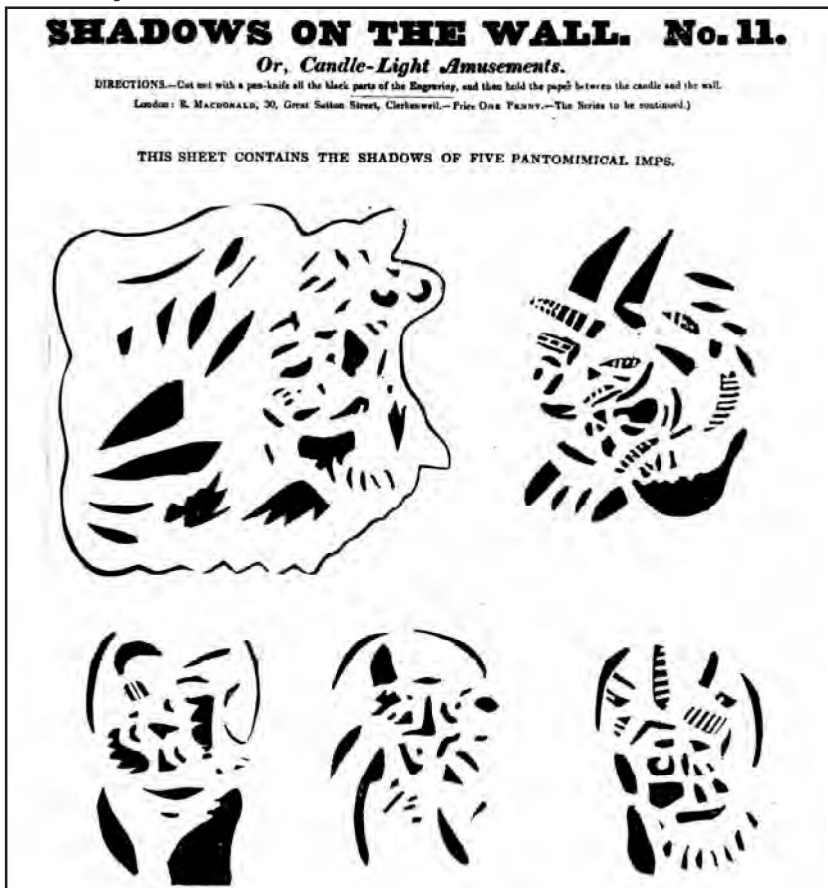
embellished with a poem and the name of recipient or giver. Even family pets (Fig. 8) might be immortalised in this way. A few rare examples exist from the 1820s in which the eyes and tongue were made to wobble about – but these were of ‘spectres’ or ‘bogles’ rather than recognisable real people (Figs 9–10).

The earliest record I have found of a ‘White Shadow’ is from the French Revolution of 1789, showing an image of King Louis XVI. No doubt there were others (about to lose their heads) at that time. The 1820s and the next 20–30 years were the popular years for this novelty, with printers and publishers such as Joseph Graves, J.V. Quick, M. Elliot, J. Wood, G. Bishop and R. Macdonald, all from London, competing with each other to sell white shadows under titles such as ‘Shadows on the Wall’, ‘Candle-Light Amusements’ or ‘Shadowy Sights for Winter Nights’. When they were produced commercially like this, there might be four or five silhouettes on a single sheet sold for a penny (1/240th of a pound), with printed black areas for cutting out with a penknife to become an evening’s entertainment with a candle (Fig. 11).

In the later 19th and early 20th centuries white shadows made something of a reappearance, sometimes supplied in family magazines and children’s papers (Fig. 12). These would print an image of some imperial hero or other, such as Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904) or David Livingstone (1813–73). Even as late as the 1930s advertising ‘Trade Cards’ were produced in France showing white shadow images of politicians, film stars and other artists.

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11. ‘Shadows on the Wall No. 11’, published by R. Macdonald of 30 Great Sutton Street, London, in about 1830, showing five ‘pantomimical imps’. The sheet would have been separated into individual images before use.



9. White shadow with moving eyes: ‘The Bogle’, published in London on 20 May 1823



10. White shadow with moving eyes: ‘A Shadow of The What is it? in Presumption or Fate of Frankenstein’, published 14 October 1823

12. Queen Victoria as a young woman. This reproduction of an original image from around 1837 appeared in the *The Picture Magazine* published by George Newnes Ltd (Vol. 6 No. 31 (July 1895), 33).

