

## REVIEW

## ICONS

# Images Stripped To Their Essence

Silhouettes made portraiture accessible and gave artists a powerful new tool.

By PETER SAENGER

When the American artist James Prosek wanted to create a panorama of life-size birds, to mourn the loss of billions of them from ecological change, he turned to silhouettes. A silhouette, he explains, is "so clean," a "fundamental reduction of nature" that harks back to the first cave paintings of animals. It's amazing, Mr. Prosek says, "how much information can be conveyed...after you take away color and dimensionality."

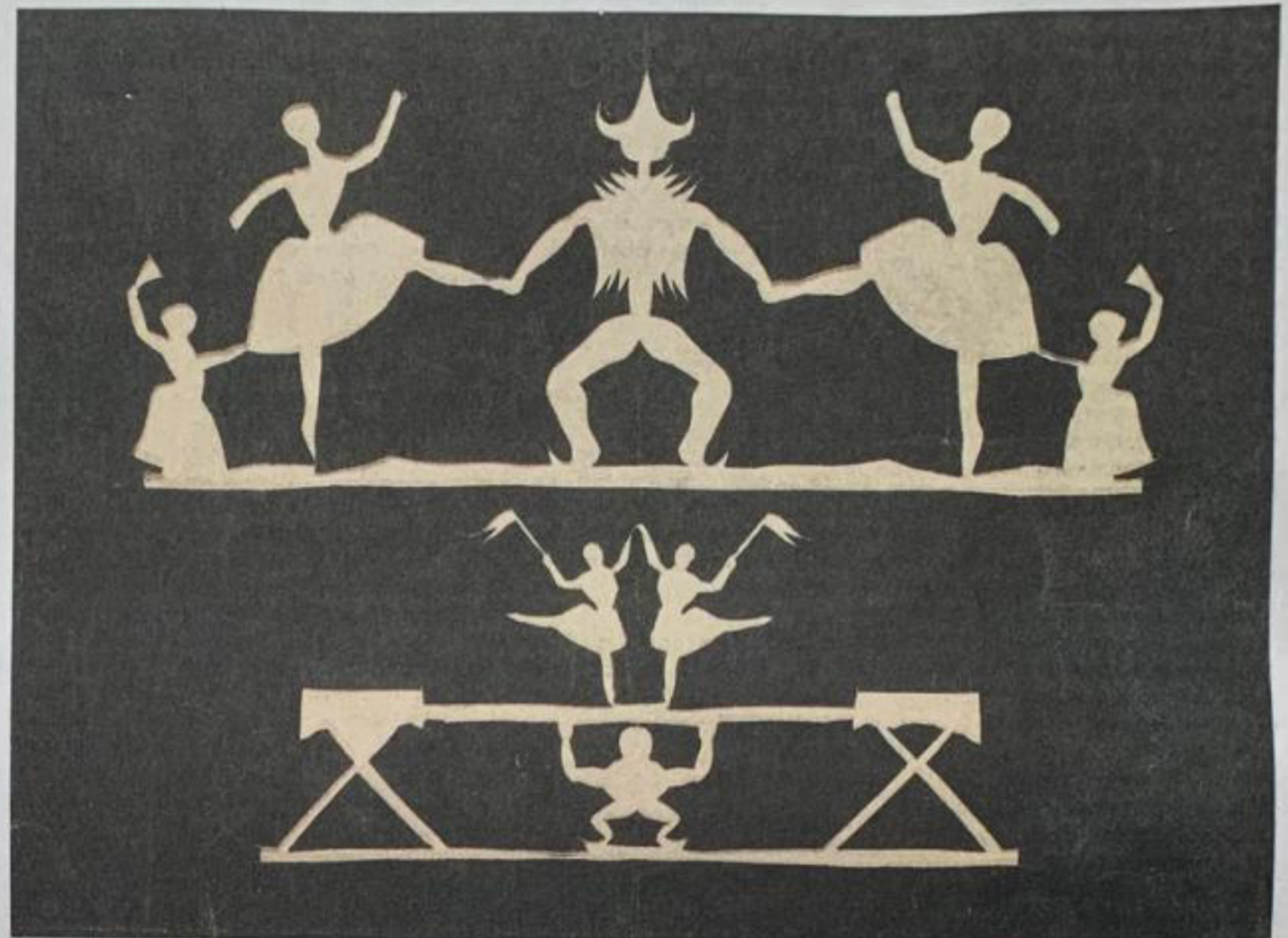
Mr. Prosek's "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," titled with a line from Robert Frost, can be seen in "In Profile: A Look at Silhouettes," a new exhibition opening Jan. 17, 2020, at the New York Historical Society in Manhattan. The curator Roberta J.M. Olson has assembled more than 150 silhouettes, from figures painted on a Greek jar around 500 B.C. to recent works, such as the American artist Kara Walker's silhouette-like cut-outs showing the horrors of slavery.

The word silhouette comes from Étienne de Silhouette, the finance minister of the 18th-century French King Louis XV, whose stingy policies were widely hated. Soon the word referred to anything inexpensive, including profile portraits cut from black paper. Silhouettes' relatively low prices spurred their popularity, Ms. Olson says; in a world without photography, they appealed to customers unable to afford portraits.

By the early 19th century, silhouette artists were crisscrossing England and America, offering their services to commemorate a loved one quickly and easily. It was "a democratized form of art," Ms. Olson says. "You didn't have to have decades of training. Silhouettes were accessible, fashionable, a kind of craze."

Surprises abound in the show. The silhouette-cutters include Hans Christian Andersen, whose work depicts fairies and acrobats, and Robert Fulton, the steamboat developer, who created a profile of Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin in 1812. Martha Ann Honeywell (1786-1856) was born without hands or forearms but was able to create silhouettes using her mouth, toes and the stump of one arm. In her 60-year career, Honeywell toured at least 35 American cities and five foreign countries. One of her specialties was the text of the Lord's Prayer, cut from beige paper and stitched in silk; an 1845 version is included in the show.

One of the most successful silhouette creators, Auguste Édouart (1789-1861), was born in France but made his career in England and America, portraying wealthy doctors and real estate tycoons—and future president Millard Fillmore, whose silhouette he created in



Top, a silhouette of acrobats by Hans Christian Andersen, ca. 1835-60. Above, 'George Ring and Family' by Auguste Édouart, 1840.

1841. To produce silhouettes, many artists used a physiognotrace, a machine with a movable wooden frame on a bracket, or else worked from a person's shadow. But Édouart drew freehand in graphite, without any aids. Once he had an outline he would snip around it, often in five minutes or less.

Two of Édouart's works on view in "In Profile" show entire families. George Ring, a shipping-industry supplier, posed with his family in New York in 1840. Two women, one probably knitting in a rocking chair, sit by a table topped with an oil lamp, while a woman talks to a man at a piano and another man sits by the fire in a chair with a wooden attachment for reading books. With the most modest of means, the artist succeeds in evoking a lively evening at home, with each family member individualized.

By the mid-19th century, however, silhouettes were losing out to photography as a medium of commemoration. Since then, artists have turned to silhouettes for aesthetic rather than commercial reasons.

One of the most famous living artists to use the technique is Ms. Walker, born in 1969. Her visit to Algiers Point, a New Orleans neighborhood where enslaved Africans were held before being transported to slave markets, inspired her to create a monumental calliope, "The Katastwóf Karavan," using the Haitian word for catastrophe. A small model for that site-specific commission is on view at the New York Historical Society; one of its silhouette-like images depicts marching slaves, two yoked together. Silhouettes also influence Ms. Walker's portrait of Toni Morrison, capturing her distinctive profile as well as her literary power, here shown as white smokelike strands pouring out of her mouth.

Béatrice Coron keeps to the brighter side of silhouettes in "Hi Five! Stories from the Five Boroughs," a series of 8-foot-wide works envisioning each borough of New York City. Ms. Coron, born in France in 1956, has jumbled past, present and future to create a dizzying silhouette landscape. Easy-to-identify sights like the Brooklyn Bridge and Yankee Stadium mix with more obscure places like Houdini's tomb in Queens. For Staten Island, Ms. Coron has included a statue of a Native American warrior that was proposed in the early 1900s; meant to be taller than the Statue of Liberty, it was never built. She says of the silhouette medium, "It's so simple and it's so complex.... You focus on the essential."