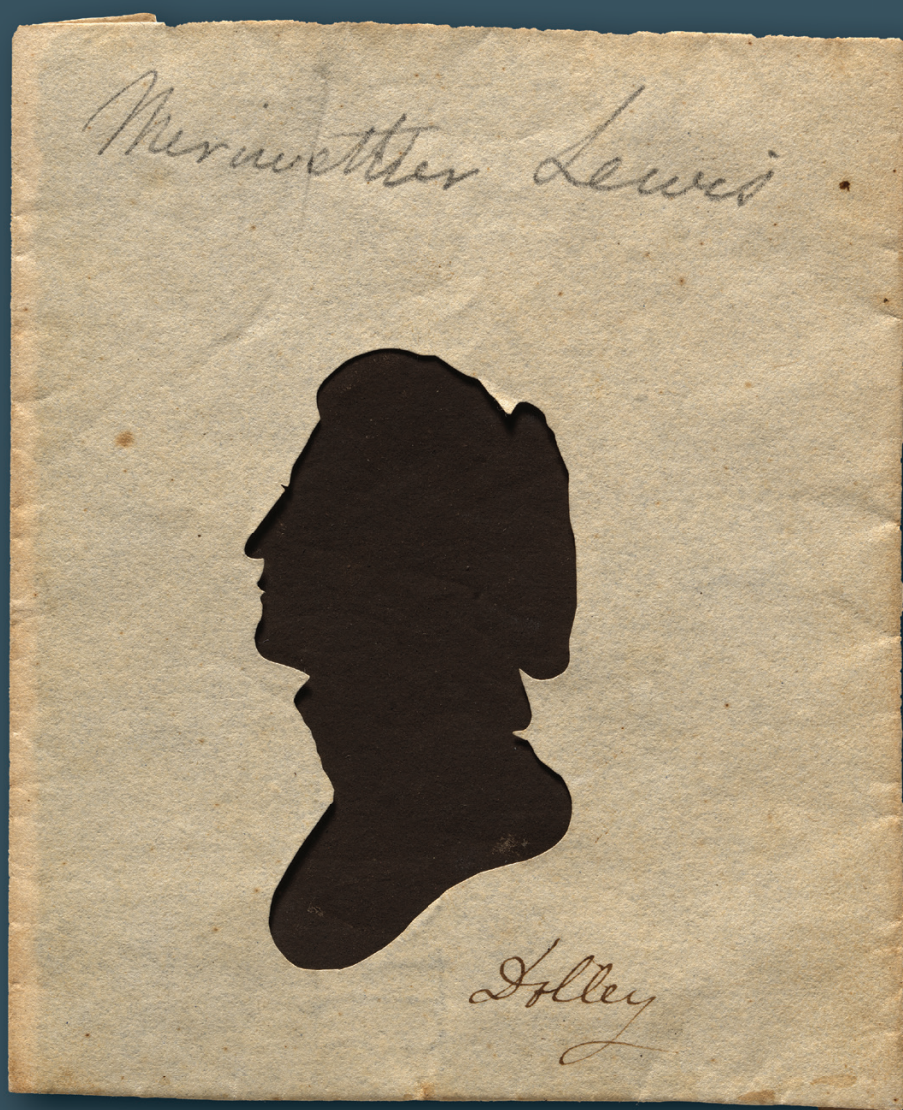




Profile in Paper

By Leslie Przybylek, Senior Curator



Meriwether Lewis, c. 1800-1825, attributed to Dolley Payne Todd Madison.
Smithsonian Institution, National Portrait Gallery, NPG.77.28.

The idea of a “National Portrait Gallery” conjures up visions of grand painted canvases. But one of the most intriguing portraits in the History Center’s new exhibition, *Smithsonian’s Portraits of Pittsburgh: Works from the National Portrait Gallery*, is a tiny image created with cut paper. The silhouette is identified as Meriwether Lewis (1774–1809), Thomas Jefferson’s personal secretary and famed leader of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The portrait’s creation is attributed to Dolley Madison (1768–1849), wife of James Madison, founding father and fourth president of the United States. How did these two famous Americans meet and what connection between them could explain this image?

While the attribution of Dolley Madison as the artist is not conclusive, details of her biography make it feasible. The daughter of fervent Quakers, Dolley was born in North Carolina but moved with her family to Philadelphia when she was about 15. The Quaker community in Philadelphia had long preferred using silhouettes to preserve and share their likenesses with fellow Quakers, setting themselves apart from a non-Quaker cultural elite that commissioned painted portraits in what was then the nation’s leading city. Quaker women were the primary keepers of these images, creating scrapbooks, learning to cut silhouettes, and maintaining bonds between families. It is easy to envision quick, clever Dolley picking up this craft as part of the social life of her community. Although Dolley was later expelled from the Quaker faith when she married her non-Quaker second husband James Madison (her first husband, a son, and in-laws all died tragically in a yellow fever outbreak in August 1793), the tradition of cutting silhouettes could have retained its communal meaning for her.


Meriwether Lewis probably first crossed paths with Dolley Madison sometime after 1801, when both ended up in the new capital of Washington, D.C., through their connections to President Thomas Jefferson. Lewis initially

came to Pittsburgh as part of the Virginia militia summoned to quell the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794; the journey changed the course of his life. He joined the regular army a year later and developed expertise in understanding the nation's western frontier. President Thomas Jefferson greatly valued this knowledge and trusted Lewis, whose family he knew back in Virginia. He summoned Lewis from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C., to become his private secretary after he assumed the presidency in February 1801.

Jefferson appointed James Madison secretary of state in March 1801, so he and Dolley also made their way to Washington. Dolley helped the new president with some of the White House social functions, and at one point she and her husband even resided there. James Madison worked with President Jefferson to gain congressional approval for the funds needed for the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. It was likely sometime during this period that Dolley Madison first met Meriwether Lewis, who also lived in the new presidential mansion.

Just six years Lewis senior, Dolley Madison was part of a circle of women who became fascinated by the idea of Jefferson's western expedition following the Louisiana Purchase. As plans for the Corps of Discovery got under way, the women also worried about the safety and comfort of the men participating in the journey. Dolley led efforts to raise money to outfit the men with some of the equipment they would need for the trip. In thanks for her work, Lewis and Clark later gave her some of the utensils that they used on the expedition after they returned to Washington, D.C.

It is fun to speculate about the creation of the silhouette—did Dolley cut it from life? Was it created later as a remembrance? Did she simply sign it? What conversations did the two share as Lewis talked of the plans for the famed journey that James Madison's lobbying efforts had helped to secure? Alas, such thoughts are mere speculation and the full story will

probably never be known. But the small image stands as a reminder of the untold stories behind the famous faces in American history, especially the stories of the many women whose largely unseen efforts and opportunities were shaped by expectations of the day. 

For further reading:

Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006.

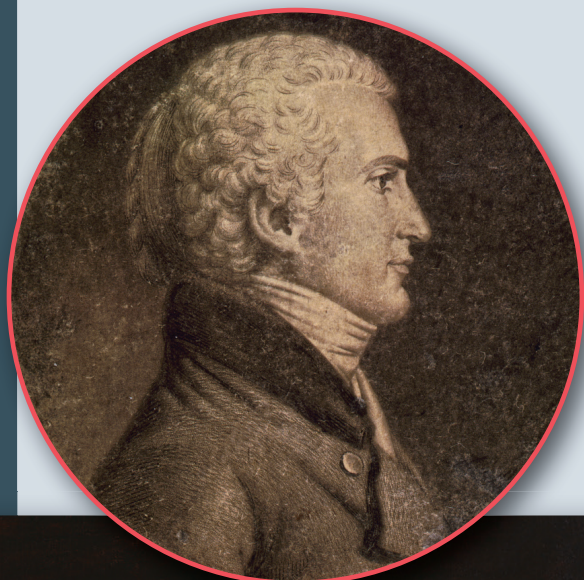
Penley Knipe, "Shades of Black and White, American Portrait Silhouettes," in Asma Naeem, *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now*, Washington, D.C. and Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press for the Smithsonian Institution, 2018.

David Lavender, *The Way to the Western Sea: Lewis and Clark across the Continent*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001; online at <https://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/item/lc.sup.lavender.01.01#n0118>.

Anne Verplanck, "The Silhouette and Quaker Identity in Early National Philadelphia," *Winterthur Portfolio* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 41-78; <https://doi.org/10.1086/597173>.

Meriwether Lewis, facing right, Charles Balthazar Julien Févret de Saint-Mémin, c. 1805.

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



Dolley Madison, 1804 by Gilbert Stuart, oil on canvas.

White House Collection / White House Historical Association.

