

Jacob Spornberg

(1768–c.1840s)



Jacob and Rebecca Spornberg. A pair of paper silhouettes cut by Lucius Gahagan in 1828. Lucius was not a silhouettist but a sculptor based in Bath and a friend of the Spornbergs. He seems to have made these silhouettes for fun.

The next project is inspired by the artist Jacob Spornberg, the eighteenth-century inventor of the Etruscan profile. Although some might regard these as miniature portraits, they are generally still considered silhouettes since the emphasis is on a strong outline painted in a series of waves.

A marriage of love

Jacob Spornberg was born in Finland and went on to study painting in Stockholm, Sweden. In 1785, his drawing master made a trip to England, then asked his wife to join him with Spornberg acting as chaperone. Once there, Spornberg decided that England was where he should pursue his career as an artist. An accomplished portrait and landscape painter, he was skilled in oil, watercolour and etching techniques, but it was with silhouettes that he made his mark.

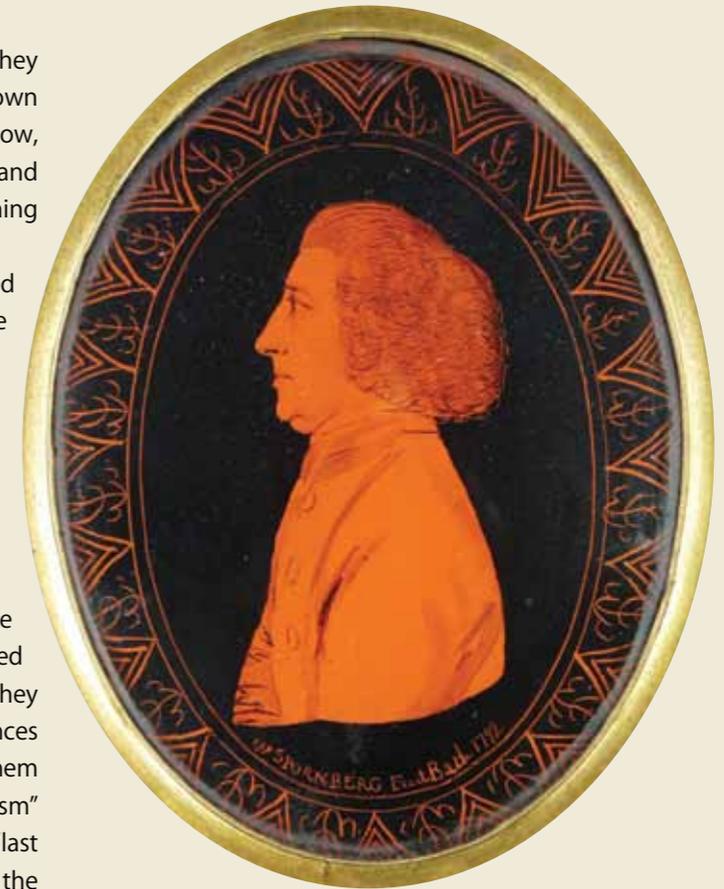
Spornberg found that there were already plenty of silhouettists offering painted and cut profiles in a wide variety of styles and a range of prices. Rather than compete directly, he sought to reinvent the genre. Taking his inspiration from the striking red and black paintings found on Etruscan pottery, he decided to paint outside the profile, rather than the profile itself. He then embellished the whole head, including the facial features, in thin black paint. Spornberg painted a number of these *en grisaille* on paper (see page 121), but his most famous works were painted on small, convex glass ovals, backed with a striking vermillion enamel.

Soon after inventing this process, which he advertised as “profiles painted in the Etruscan manner”, Spornberg met his wife and lifelong partner, Rebecca. This union caused a certain amount of eyebrow-raising as Rebecca was a widow more than ten years his senior, with a number of children of her own. When they married, Jacob was 27 and Rebecca in her late thirties. Sadly, it seems Rebecca was ostracized by her own family (including her children), who didn’t approve of the young unknown artist from Finland. Nevertheless, the marriage succeeded and the couple went on to have two children of their own,

the second born when Rebecca was nearly 50. They settled in the fashionable city of Bath, a well-known centre for silhouettists at the time. Then, as now, visitors flocked to the city to “take the waters” and perambulate the ancient town, often commissioning shades as souvenirs as they did so.

For his Etruscan profiles, Spornberg requested two sittings, each of about three minutes. The first was to paint a solid outline, while the second was to embellish the details of the face, hair and clothing using thinner paint. The outline needed time to dry or the solvent used to thin the paint would spoil it. This two-stage process suggests that Spornberg was working freehand onto glass, rather than relying on sketches or cartoons.

Etruscan profiles were a success for a while and copied by a number of other artists. Dated Spornberg silhouettes span nearly 25 years, so they clearly formed an important part of the family finances for some time. In the end, though, demand for them does seem to have waned. In the new “modernism” of Regency England they began to look a little “last century”, a bit too Georgian in fact. Rebecca, on the other hand, did well in the world of fashion. In her later years, she reinvented herself as a milliner and dressmaker and seems to have been much sought



An Etruscan profile by Spornberg (collection of Diana Joll).



Etruscan pottery detail (collection of the Vatican Museums).

after. She was even commissioned to make a dress for Queen Charlotte on a visit to Bath. Perhaps Spornberg became involved in working for his wife’s business as the demand for his Etruscan profiles dried up.

It is not known when Rebecca died, but it is thought that she was still working as a dressmaker into her 70s. It is known that Spornberg sailed alone to the New World in the summer of 1840, presumably to join their son, who had emigrated a number of years earlier and was working as a cabinet maker in Indiana. Spornberg had often told his children that he believed the United States was the country with the greatest future of all and that it was there he wished to die. This was a wish that seems to have come true.