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Bunce's bonce: Silhouette artist Charles Burns captures Reading Post community editor Alan Bunce's profile advertisement

Profile of unique silhouette artist

By [Alan Bunce](#)

February 16, 2012

When Charles Burns wanted to gain the skills of the silhouette artist there were no instruction books and no-one to learn from.

The knack, commonplace 150 years ago, died out when photography came along in the mid 19th Century so Mr Burns taught himself.

Now, 20 years on, he has written a book to teach others.

Mr Burns, 50, from Emmer Green, has the remarkable ability to accurately cut a person's profile, something he does in around 90 seconds.

Using surgical scissors, he cuts the silhouettes on black paper with white backing paper giving him a copy of each one he does. Those copies, now numbering 150,000, are stored in albums in his Peppard Road home.

They include the Queen and Prince Philip, former US president Bill Clinton, astronaut Neil Armstrong and TV stars ranging from Eric Idle and Jamie Oliver to Derren Brown and Ian Hislop among scores of well known names.

So high is his profile he was asked by a publisher to write *Mastering Silhouettes*, a new book for both UK and US markets breathing life into the virtually extinct artistic skill. The book gets an official launch today in London.

After leaving school in Dorset with art his only A-level, Mr Burns went to Wolverhampton art college and left with a degree in fine art.

But he was dismayed to see fellow students leaving for jobs outside the art world.

He said: "I thought, 'I don't want to do that'. I'd trained as an artist. I became a street artist at various places and settled at Covent Garden, drawing people.

"Other artists would come along and say, 'How can I do this?' but I knew they would never get a pitch unless they could demonstrate they were different."

Those questions led him to consider doing something different himself but at first he doubted he could recreate the skills of the silhouette artist.

He said: "I had no-one to ring, nowhere to read about it and no-one to teach me because it is such an old skill."

After research and practice he was able to reproduce accurate profiles and started adding that to his work at Covent Garden.

An entertainments agency spotted him there and arranged his first booking - a New Year party in Dubai.

Six years ago he attended his most prestigious job yet, the Queen's 80th birthday party where silhouettes included Her Majesty and the Duke of Edinburgh.

Mr Burns said: "I did the Queen's silhouette and I wasn't sure what she thought but later people kept coming out and saying, 'The Queen likes the silhouette'. She was going round the room showing people."

Now with an average of three bookings a week, weddings, parties and other functions account for around 10,000 silhouettes he does each year.

Mr Burns has featured on *Blue Peter*, *Big Brother's Big Mouth* with Russell Brand and a BBC2 series called *Tales of Tools*.

What appeals to people, he said, is the chance to see something done quickly by human effort, not a computer.

He added: "We live in such a technology age that people appreciate the simplicity of the silhouette."

Visit www.roving-artist.com for more.

Mastering Silhouettes is published by Fil Rouge Press and costs £16.99.

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Very appropriate for another esteemed artist to compliment Mr. Burns of following in silhouette artists footsteps of the past 300 years. His book, like Kathryn Flackin's book, both will be treasures and perhaps inspire others to preserve the lost art. I had my silhouette cut at Disney, Japan and at Disney, Ca., one by a woman, one by a man. I think Disney helped revise the art, as I always hear that you go there to get a good silhouette. He probably got the idea to write a similar book, when he saw Ms. Flackin put his name and silhouette in her book. Her book is "Silhouettes, Rediscovering the Lost Art."

Ming Chao
Cindi Rose, Houston

18/02/2012 at 04:07 [Offensive or Inappropriate?](#)

My sister, Holly, now deceased, and I both have cut silhouettes for 40 years, in London and all over the US, since the late 60's. We love the art, and it is indeed, always self-taught. I had the pleasure, too of cutting silhouettes on Blue Peter in 1971 with Peter Duncan. Now, I do silhouettes for survivors, donating to cancer survivors, and of course, events all over the world, as well as education. I look forward to meeting Charles one day, my fellow silhouette artist friend, Kathryn Flocken also wrote a how to Cut silhouette book, called, "Silhouettes, Rediscovering the Lost Art" but found from the over 3,000 sold, only one person learned to cut silhouettes. She has one of Charles' silhouettes in her book, and I am glad she inspired him to write a similar type book 10 years later, it preserves the art!

Cindi Rose, Houston

17/02/2012 at 07:09 [Offensive or Inappropriate?](#)

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