The most beautiful part was that you could conjure up and imagine things much better with paper and scissors than with any other technique. As a result of this and probably because of the inclination towards abstraction, paper sheets have been realised which perpetuated in a new manner the beautiful and serene forms of past centuries. (Fritz Griebel)

The painter and graphic artist Fritz Griebel (1899-1976) discovered his personal form of artistic expression - the silhouette - in his childhood. This graphic medium, which is solely characterised by the outline, makes possible the reduction to the very essence of artistic representation. The aim of this study is to point to Fritz Griebel’s lifelong research of elemental forms of representation through the art of the silhouette. Furthermore his cut-outs will be discussed from a more general - art historical - viewpoint and within the broader framework given by the movement of New Classicism. Though he worked with other artistic media such as oil painting and watercolours, he first developed his artistic position through silhouettes. In doing so, he not only reanimated this technique but also its themes. It is therefore not surprising that when his artistic estate, which belongs to the family, was archived in 2006 the silhouettes represent the most important category with more than 1000 cut-outs followed by 405 watercolours, 176 oil paintings, 77 lithographs and 80 chalk drawings.1

The medium “silhouette” - a short survey
China, where around the year 105 A.D. the fabrication of paper was discovered, is often considered as the country of origin of European silhouette art. Recent research points more and more to the belief that the European silhouette or paper cut-out art has been developed from the decorative leather cut-outs of Oriental book binding which can be detected back to the 8th century.2
From Persia the book paper cut-outs arrived at the Byzantine court where the technique destined for a practical use was transformed into a pure ornamental form. Along with travel souvenirs it was mostly the frequent commerce with the Orient between cities such as Venice and later on, Amsterdam, which made the technique known in Europe. Around 1600 the white silhouette developed in Europe and 200 years later the technique of the black silhouette came about. Typical features of the white silhouette are the use of white material as well as miniaturisation and the structured ornamentation of the surface. The thematic repertory embraced portraits of sovereigns, landscapes, maritime subjects as well as vases, hunting scenes and fragments of architecture. By cuts in the picture’s internal area and marks applied with a knife it was possible to obtain effects of high plasticity. The cut-outs were often collected in volumes or remembrance-books (alba amicorum). The type of silhouette reminiscent of lace can be distinguished from the mainly figurative white silhouette. These devotional and commemorative pictures have a painted miniature at their centre which is framed by an ornamental frame.

Around 1760 the portrait silhouette first appeared in England and France. It belongs to the black-silhouette technique and is widely used to represent the medium of the silhouette as a whole. The portrait silhouette is mainly defined by the outline and the featureless interior. Only with the emergence of the genre and the landscape silhouette did cuts in the interior of the image begin to appear, as similar to those seen in the white silhouette technique. In the beginning the term silhouette, named after a French minister of finances, Etienne de Silhouette, meant to fix an ephemeral shadow profile by means of the outline. Several factors contributed to the fact that around 1770 silhouette art became the pastime for the better educated upper class. Following the archaeological excavations in Herculaneum since 1738 and Pompeii since 1748 a new enthusiasm for antiquity broke out which associated the silhouette with black figure pottery and with profiles on coins. In addition, the rising self-conscientiousness of the bourgeoisie which clamoured for self-representation contributed to this fashion: the production of a silhouette was much cheaper than the painting of a miniature. Another factor was the passion for phrenology which stated that the intellectual capabilities of a human being are revealed by the form of the head and for the physionomology which pretended that the outward appearance reflects a person’s character. These factors contributed widely to the distribution of silhouettes which were considered to be genuine, objective representations. Finally, an aspect related to art theory must be mentioned: in 1770 and 1800 the subject of the invention of the art of drawing after the Naturalis historia by Pliny the older was very popular. It describes how the daughter of the potter Dibutadis copied the shadow of her lover. In this manner the superiority of the line, claimed by many classicists, was historically legitimized. Only with the emergence of the photography by 1860 did the interest in silhouettes decrease.

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From the beginnings in childhood to the formation as an artist in Nuremberg and Berlin

When looking at Griebel’s silhouettes it becomes obvious that he used and mastered all techniques: white and black silhouette techniques as well as lace-like cut-outs and types such as portrait and genre silhouette. He discovered the medium of silhouette at a period when it once again received public approval. The rebirth of the art of the silhouette between 1890 and 1920 was due in particular to the interest of the expressionists in lino- and woodcuts which lead to similar aesthetic results.4 Thus, during World War I, cards from the front or series of cards created for charitable means showing silhouettes were printed.5 While still a child Fritz Griebel had made portrait silhouettes of his parents, brothers and sisters. He remembers: "During World War I a succinct history of silhouettes was published which contributed to my own experimentations."6 This can only be Martin Knapp’s publication Deutsche Schatten- und Scherenbilder aus drei Jahrhunderten [German Silhouettes from Three Centuries] from 1916. Very possibly Fritz Griebel saw the farcical cut-outs by Rudolf Wilhelm von Stubenberg (1643-1677) for the first time in this booklet.7 These influenced the young artist thematically and stylistically. His white silhouettes reference Stubenberg’s stylistic device of intersecting animals and mythological figures with foliage. From these figures, which in Griebel’s work are sitting in the branches or seem to grow out of the foliage, shall develop, 30 years later, his floating figures and signs.

Having finished Gymnasium at the age of 18, Griebel became a student of the Academy of Arts and Crafts in Nuremberg.8 Because of his military service in Nuremberg he had to interrupt his studies of book arts and graphic arts with Rudolf Schiestl (1878-1931) in 1917 and could only continue studying in 1919. He became known to a wider audience with his book illustrations for which he got critical approval as well.9 Thus, his silhouettes in the small book Gottesgarten [Garden of God]10 from 1922, in which texts of traditional songs are put together with silhouettes, reveal his innovative pictorial language. He places his representations of the Holy Virgin in extravagant flora and fauna; the way he stretches the outline is sometimes adorned with flourishes as seen in Baroque Art. The cut-outs do not show any association with the Biedermaier-Period of German art to which the art of silhouette is often linked.
1922 was also the year in which Griebel, together with his friend Georg Holl, moved to Berlin to continue his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts. Here he later enrolled as a student of the master class of Hans Meid (1883-1957). During daytime the two friends worked in the technique of the silhouette and discussed the results in the evening. Griebel comments: "It became more and more interesting for us that through this technique the question of the outline, of the silhouette, which is so important for every artistic creation, should be resolved."12

The turn towards the Greek-Roman antiquity - the discovery of theme and form
Characterised until this moment by largely fissured surfaces and, therefore, a heterogeneous outline, the cut-outs made by Griebel were undergoing changes beginning in 1923. In addition, Griebel discovered the theme that will determine his art of the silhouette. The cut-outs of his first period reproduce subjects known from the Bible such as the Passion, the Apocalypse, Legend and from mythology and folklore, which he very often put against a background provided by nature, with native and exotic trees, cut in such a way that they appear to be immobile or moving. The works of the second period are informed by patterns borrowed from antiquity. Nature became secondary.

His interest in antiquity has been explained by his travels to Italy since 1924 and his visits to Italian museums. This was surely a source of inspiration for Griebel. Extensive research has, however, proven that his perception of antiquity must be seen in the broader context of art history and was linked to the international movement of New Classicism (1910-1930). The objectives of this avant-garde movement were formed during World War I in France and Italy and, at the end of the war, spread quickly to such an extent that parallel movements took birth in Germany and in England. Leading figures of European art including Picasso (1881-1971), Matisse (1869-1954) or Maillol (1861-1944) rediscovered the cultural heritage of antiquity as a stimulating form. The main attribute of this New Classicism was the principle of stylistic synthesis, the balance between stylisation and the observation of nature, between expression and harmony. Archaeological excavations of the late 19th and early 20th century focused the interest of artists towards earlier cultural art forms such the Etruscan art (8./7. - 1st Century B.C.). Inspired by works from antiquity, contemporary artists created a counterpoint to a world destroyed by war. This ideal, the movement of New Classicism, was based on the imitation of the antiquity as a whole. It embodied a higher, purer and better reality.

The paper cut-out Flower-vase from 1923, announces Fritz Griebel’s vision of antiquity as well as two important subjects of his art: nudes and still lives. The couple represented on the vase is emphasised by the cuts in the interior of the figures whereby the way the outline is cut reminds of a sketch. The flowers and leaves of the bouquet are, compared to earlier cut-outs, not cut each but resemble a homogeneous mass. The surface becomes more important for Griebel, and the cuts in the interior become an essential means of expression. In parallel, the outline becomes simpler, which means that it is less detailed, showing less interruptions.
Beginning in 1929 more and more cut-outs which show objects inspired by Greek antiquity appear in Griebel’s silhouette art: theatre masks, gods and goddesses, fragments of sculptures such as torsis, colossal heads and heads to be inserted in, vases, amphorae, head-vases, vessels for oil having the form of a rooster as well as animals including horses, deers, dogs, rams, and birds. This underlines that Griebel made use of all kinds of antique inspiration - from the early Geometrical style (900-825 BC), to the early Archaic style (700-620 BC) and to High Hellenistic art (230-150 BC) - to express his creative ideas through association. For him, as for the representatives of the New Classicism, there was no contradiction between Greek archaism and the ideal of the classical period. Since the 1930s, Griebel started to reflect intensely on the nudes created by Cézanne (1839-1906) which have also inspired the artists of the avant-garde. In addition, a multitude of paintings and drawings which referred to antique cut-outs such as the series Copies from Antiquity from 1933 were realised at this period.

His studies in Berlin finished, Griebel settles down in Heroldsberg as a freelance artist. The reaction of art criticism towards the new period in his silhouette art was mostly reserved. At the occasion of the exhibition at the Kunstverein in Erlangen in 1933 a critic praised Griebel’s traditional portrait silhouettes and the delicacy of the figurative compositions but criticised the cut-outs inspired by antiquity: "What meaning have these heads with cut out eye holes or the raw still lives with fruits and goblets, branches and masks whose line and surface are without life?" One example is the cut-out Mask from 1938. This picture, horizontally divided in two parts of varying size, shows in the upper part a Roman head to be inserted which is decorated like a Greek theatre mask. In opposition to a traditional portrait silhouette, Griebel abandons the strict profile in favour of a ¾ profile. The bend head is very clearly shaped by cuts in the internal area and looks like a sculpture. It is possible that this innovative accentuation of the internal cuts by Griebel was inspired by the Attic black figure pottery in which the outline of the black figures is scratched in the clay before it is fired. Griebel replaced these scratches with cuts in the internal area. The eyes which are cut out reveal the white colour of the pictorial support. It is possible that Griebel was inspired by Roman bronze sculptures whose empty eyes provoke a similar aesthetic effect. The lower part shows various jugs which are barely decorated and a vessel for oil in the form of a rooster.

This cut-out reveals Griebel’s radical new formal language which deals in an associative manner with the stylistic repertoire of antiquity. Nothing comparable was created in the framework of the silhouette art in Germany during this period. For Griebel the silhouette is a self-sufficient form of artistic expression which has nothing in common with the amateurish pastime of the 18th and late 19th century. It has been the destiny of many avant-garde artists to be regarded suspiciously by the critics. The circumstances were aggravating for Griebel: starting in 1933, the national socialists forbade all avant-garde art. Furthermore, the interest in silhouettes declined in the late 1920s.

However, Griebel never abandoned his artistic preoccupations. He continued to seek a new relationship between form and sense within the framework of the silhouette. In this way, he
expressed himself about his art of cut-out: "The silhouette, among the children of the arts the
the last one and the most despised, even if Runge, Menzel and Schwind have been interested
in the poor thing, is, when one takes a little care of it, full of joy and imagination and not as
sentimental as one always pretends. It cannot provide what one expects from the more
demanding brothers and sisters such as painting, sculpture and the graphic arts, but it has
characteristics which the others do not have, namely the severe black and white, the accuracy
of the outline which only the scissors can realise but also a tender inclination towards
plasticity with the fine cast-shadow on the snow-white paper." Beginning in 1925 Griebel only rarely exhibited his avant-garde cut-outs in public. Instead his
interest shifted to commercial art as the production of silhouettes for book illustrations which,
while still of a high quality, repressed his innovations within the medium of the paper cut-out.
Initiated by the art historian Justus Bier (1899-1990) an exhibition was organised in 1936 at
the Kestner Society in Hanover which Bier curated and which presented works by Griebel and
the sculptor Gerhard Marcks (1889-1981). Marcks, an "absolute admirer of Greece" had
discovered, like other sculptors, archaic sculpture as an appropriate means of expression in
1928. In the late 1920s the archaeologists were also euphoric about the Archaic Period. Marcks
presented bronzes, drawings and graphic arts, Griebel presented paintings, a few
watercolours, drawings and 30 silhouettes. Exposed against the background of Marcks’
sculptures, the latter must have revealed their space-creating effects more boldly. But at this
exhibition indifference and even rejection were once again the predominant reactions.

The essence of the form

World War II imposed other restrictions on Griebel’s artistic career: he was conscripted into the
army and spent the war from 1940 to 1945 in Bamberg, Boxel (Netherlands) and Streitberg. A
group exhibition planned in 1940 was cancelled just before the opening for political reasons. He
did, however, arrange, due to the intervention of his friend the sculptor Gustav Seitz (1906-1969), a
successful commercial exhibition at the Kunstdienst Berlin in 1942. In a letter to his friend
Seitz wrote: "I am mostly pleased with the choice. When I arrived at the location I was happy that
only silhouettes were exhibited. They are so rich in possibilities." And with regard to previous
exhibitions of Griebel he says: "Your main mistake is to present the great variety of your
talents at the same time. This is without meaning here. A uniform image as the silhouette, as
such must be the exhibition of your work."
After his appointment as professor of Landscape painting and the Graphic Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Nuremberg in 1946, Griebel became the head of the academy from 1948 to 1957. During his term as director, the new building at Bingstraße was constructed. Until he retired from the academy in 1966, he taught a class of Graphic Arts.

Around 1945 Griebel revolutionised the art of the silhouette for a second time by printing the paper for the cut-outs using a manual lithographic technique. In this way he obtained a very delicately structured grey which is close to black. In the 1960s he added red and yellow-brownish paper to this technique. Around 1950 he started to work on picture support by adding coloured spots with a brush or making a greater number of lithographs of the paper prepared in such a manner.

Through the link established between silhouette and graphic techniques Griebel succeeded in enriching of the medium which let him come close to Matisse. In the 1930s, Matisse utilised silhouettes first as technical support for his large sized paintings such as The Dance and Red and Black before he executed his compositions with oil paint. In theory, he had utilised this technique beginning in 1913 with his papiers découpés. He made use of the papiers découpés as an autonomous form of expression since the 1940s. He covered the cardboard with pure gouache leaving visible the tracks of the brush. From this painted paper Matisse cut out the forms. He inverted, as Fritz Griebel did, the principles of painting: first the colour than the outline realised with scissors, and at last the composition.

Since the 1940s Griebel’s work reveals a tendency towards abstraction in his silhouettes which became, together with the technical innovations, the basis for his third work period. It had been accomplished through two themes: the human figure and signs and forms.

In the cut-out Composition of People with Animals, made in 1940, he maintains a composition reminiscent of a frieze similar to the cut-out Mask. It could be considered a characteristic stylistic device. This pictorial arrangement is probably inspired by Stubenberg’s white silhouettes but Attic geometrical and archaic black figure pottery in which the figures and ornaments are arranged one below the other such as in friezes could be mentioned as possible sources as well. If since the mid-1920s Griebel’s cut-outs have mostly shown human representations or sculpture-like representations in complete immobility and harmony tending towards abstraction, a more and more non-figurative representation begins to predominate beginning in the 1940s. The conclusion is found in the anthropomorphic idols and totems of the 1960s. It must be said that Griebel’s formal language is not stringent because he always returned to the stylistic devices of earlier periods in his work.

Griebel’s research for the essence of form over decades connects him with Matisse’s lifelong quest to dissolve form out of the appearance of the idea or object to be represented down to its very essence. This essence functions as the signifier of the object of what is to be represented. In the 1960s, Griebel transfers the signs he has developed through silhouettes and which are pure two-dimensional surfaces to oil painting. About his formal repertoire he says: "One will ask: 'But why this form?' It is the result of my serious work and couldn’t be different. Like the great variety of all the images in the nature these coloured poetry and black pieces of art are
created as company or symbol of the joy and the seriousness of our existence. They want to be welcome just as a little melody, a few flowers or fruits. ²²⁷

In the 1950s Fritz Griebel started once again to exhibit his silhouettes. In 1961, the only short monograph²²⁸ of his silhouettes written till today was published. In his book Signs of Christendom, published in 1959, the son of a minister created new Christological symbols because such "symbols need to be renewed for each period"²²⁹. "Thus I tried to recreate in a signifying manner the existing rich material, to draw it and to realise it through the current technique of the paper cut-out. " With these symbolic forms which are anchored in the formal tradition of antiquity, the pictorial world of antiquity, characterised by measure, harmony and serenity, becomes once again a source of Griebel’s art.

Thus, Fritz Griebel exemplifies an artist’s life which despite social-political repression and obstacles set by the art scene remained faithful to essential principles and which in his continual quest for elemental forms of expression he was able to find it in the art the silhouette.

Translation by Andrea Grunert

⁷ The silhouettes can be found in the department of graphic arts in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg.
⁹ Cf. for example Dekorative Kunst (1921), Deutsches Volkstum (1922).
¹⁰ Published by Der Bund, Nuremberg, 1922 and 1929.
¹² Fritz Griebel: Papierschnitte, op. cit., no pagination.
¹³ Cf. Fritz Griebel: Scherenschnitte (1920-1965), op. cit., p. 34.
¹⁵ Black silhouette on blue paper, 33x23 cm, private collection.
¹⁶ Erlanger Tageblatt, April 12th, 1933.
¹⁷ Black silhouette, 23,5 x 22cm, private collection.
21 Cf. the booklet of the exhibition Gerhard Marcks - bronzes and drawings, Fritz Griebel - paintings, drawings and silhouettes, Kestner Society Hanover, 1936.
26 A term chosen by Matisse for the silhouette to distinguish it from the papiers collés (collages) of the cubists.