Silhouette Art

Background:

A silhouette is the image of a person, animal, object or scene rendered as a solid shape against a contrasting background. Images that have very clear contours are preferred so that the subject is easily recognizable. Silhouettes have traditionally been black, but there is no reason why you can’t make one in another color.

When people think of silhouettes, they may call to mind the popular profile portraits from the 18th and 19th centuries, but the art form actually goes back thousands of years to the outline drawings and shadow paintings of Stone Age cave artists. The simplest of these artworks show outlines of animals filled in with flat earth tones. Profile art continued in ancient times in the tomb paintings, relief sculptures, and pottery decorations of Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Minoans, Greeks, and Etruscans. Once paper became readily available, shadow portraits and scenes became popular. Artists drew the outlines of people and objects by tracing around the cast shadows created by sunlight, candlelight or lamplight.

The word “silhouette” derives from the name of the frugal mid-18th-century French finance minister, Étienne de Silhouette, who liked to cut paper shadow portraits. Paper-cut silhouettes grew fashionable in 18th-century Europe and America as personal mementos and souvenirs. By the mid-19th-century, shadow pictures and silhouettes became a type of folk art, often created by itinerant artists in popular venues.

Twentieth century examples can be seen in animated Walt Disney cartoons and poster art. But silhouettes can be more than quaint or beautiful: The contemporary American artist Kara Walker uses the silhouette create powerful commentary on race and gender relations.

It’s easy to create silhouette art, and potential variations are endless. You can find many free-to-use images here: https://pixabay.com/images/search/silhouette%20art/ or use pictures of people you find in catalogs or magazines.

The following project uses colorful backgrounds created by dripping liquid watercolors on white paper, but you can use many different kinds of art materials on your background.
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Supplies:

Watercolor or multimedia paper (or other paper of your choice)
Paper towel (if using watercolors)
Clean sponge (if using watercolors)
Liquid watercolors
Brush (if using watercolors)
Eye dropper (optional)
Coffee stirrer or dull pencil (optional)
Cup of water (for rinsing brush between colors)
Hairdryer

Black construction paper (or other color of your choice)
Scissors
Glue stick

Procedure:

For the background:

Apply a light coat of water to your paper with the sponge. Make sure you coat the entire surface of the paper. Blot the paper gently with a paper towel so that it is just moist.

Dip your brush into the liquid watercolor and swish to pick up lots of paint or use an eye dropper to drip droplets of color onto the moist paper. Watch as the color spreads a little. Make sure that you don’t get too much paint on your paper. Use a coffee stirrer or dull pencil to create lines radiating from the paint (optional).

If your paper is still very wet, use a hairdryer to dry. If your paper dries very ripply, you can flatten it by using a damp sponge on the back, sandwiching the paper between two pieces of wax paper, placing a heavy weight such as a large book on top, and leaving it over night.

Note: if you don’t have watercolors, you can use markers or colored pencils to create your background. Choose a smoother paper for dry media.
How to Make Your Silhouette Art:

Look through magazines or catalogs to find images of people or objects. Alternatively, you can download images from the internet. Remember that images should include enough detail to be recognizable by their outlines.

Gently glue your image(s) to a piece of black or colored paper. Careful: Use just enough glue to stick your image to the paper while you cut it out. Cut your image(s) out. Remove your image(s) from the black paper and discard the photo/magazine layer. Make sure to keep the black cutout(s).

Position your black cutout(s) over your colorful background until you find a place you like. Glue your cutout(s) down.