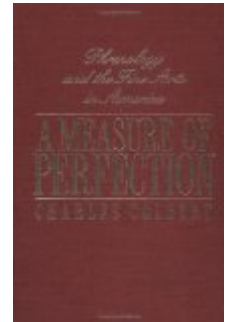


Charles Colbert. *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xvi + 441 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2370-5.



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In an old *Saturday Night Live* skit, an inept sleight-of-hand artist, played by Steve Martin, calls on a volunteer from the audience, played by Bill Murray. Martin proceeds to forceably relieve Murray of his change, then his watch, then his wallet, then his underwear. The skit ends with Martin knocking the hapless Murray to the ground, stripping him of everything he possesses. Charles Colbert's study of phrenology and fine art in nineteenth-century America, *A Measure of Perfection*, has something of this antic single-mindedness. Colbert mugs his subject in a highly entertaining and instructive fashion--and succeeds wildly, excessively, in his aims.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, phrenology took America by storm. After Johann Gaspar Spurzheim's tour of 1832 and George Combe's tour of 1838-40, phrenological societies formed in nearly every major city; phrenological lecturers crisscrossed the country, giving public readings of the skulls of eminent personages and local townspeople before large and enthusiastic audiences; Combe's *The Constitution of Man* out-sold every other book except the Bible and *Pil-*

grim's Progress. Phrenology's vogue came at a fortuitous historical juncture: the moment at which a new economic order (based on mass production and mass consumerism), a new political order (based on democratic procedures and the expansionistic nation-state), and a new social order (based on class, nationality, gender and race), were all coming into being. In this period of flux and contradiction, Americans obsessively struggled to acquire, sort out, and navigate between, highly unstable identities. Phrenology's appeal lay in its claim to be a "science of mind": the phrenological individual was legible, fixed and susceptible to scientific management. By mapping the brain onto a template of regions ("organs") corresponding to fixed aspects of moral character ("faculties" or "aptitudes"), which in turn corresponded to the "conformation" of the enfolding skull, phrenology promised to reveal a person's distinctive mixture of attributes to produce a geography of the individual. Nelson Sizer, a far-ranging mid-century phrenologist, would customarily blow into town, preceded by posters and advertisements in local papers, lecture on the theory of phrenology, and analyze the cranial bumps of vol-

unteers on stage. The show's dramatic tension would often revolve around attempts to deceive the lecturer: the leading man of the town would cloak himself in rags; a beggar would be shaved and dressed up in expensive clothes. A skillful phrenologist, according to Sizer, could never be fooled.

But more than social identity was at stake: the moral economy of industrial capitalism and the ethos of American republicanism were up for grabs. Here again the pull of phrenology was almost irresistible: it provided a cultural logic which harmonized morality, physiology, and esthetics, a set of scientific methods and doctrines that could transform self, society, and Other. At the heart of the discourse was an obsession with surveying, inventorying, and labeling the self and its constituent physical and moral components, of textualizing and disembodiment the body, while at the same time embodying abstract text and moral principle, a double impulse which phrenologists and fellow travelers termed "physical metaphysics." Interactions between mind and body, spirit and matter, individual and society, could be rationalized and taxonomized, mapped onto the body and society, a procedure that would inevitably further individual and collective progress. Phrenology had far-reaching implications and far-reaching goals.

But, until fairly recently, scholars have scantied it. Notwithstanding the enthusiasm with which influential figures like Horace Mann, Henry Ward Beecher, and other reform-minded citizens greeted the Europeans Spurzheim and Combe, literary critics and art historians have typically regarded or disregarded phrenology as an anomaly. The old conventional wisdom went something like this: After a brief fling with respectability, in the mid-1840s phrenology passed into the American hands of the Orson and Lorenzo Fowler and their followers, and thereafter devolved into a hucksterish entertainment for small town hicks and big city proles, a sideshow to the main event of

American culture. Phrenology was never more than a passing fad and did not merit the commitment of serious intellectual resources (unlike transcendentalism, which drained many gallons of literary historical ink).

A diversion phrenology may have been, but the dismissive assessment of it has not been tenable since 1955, when Norman Davies came out with *Phrenology, Fad and Science*. Phrenology, Davies argued, laid the intellectual and professional foundations of psychology, criminology, health reform, neurology, and racial taxonomy, and it provided a characterology and moral philosophy that was widely influential in mid-nineteenth-century literature, especially in the writings of those great eccentrics, Poe and Whitman. (Tellingly, Davies justified his interest in phrenology by reference to its role as a progenitor of more respectable scientific endeavors and as an influence on high literature, rather than as an intrinsically meaningful cultural phenomenon.) After Davies, studies in phrenology lay pretty much dormant until Roger Cooter's vibrantly contentious 1986 social history, *The Popular Meaning of Science*. Focusing on Great Britain, Cooter demonstrated that phrenology captivated, activated, and ultimately diverted social activists and reformers--and a large middle- and working-class audience. (*The Popular Meaning of Science* is structured around the "Why is there no socialism in Great Britain?" problem.) Phrenology, according to Cooter, figured as a scientific program for induction into the bourgeois order (a science of the bourgeois self) and, in certain variants, a program for radically transforming that order. In Marxian terms, phrenology was a historically specific variant of bourgeois ideology, and therefore, a form of false consciousness, but one which at moments contained an authentic revolutionary impulse.

Neither Cooter nor Davies, both historians, has made much of an impact on art history or literary criticism, but revived interest in phrenology

is now emerging out of the current preoccupation with non-canonical (but often influential) cultural movements, forms, and discourses, the most notable example being David S. Reynolds's stellar 1995 *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (which devotes considerable attention to things phrenological). Colbert's work falls roughly into this genre: it demonstrates the presence of non-canonical sources in canonical objects and revalues non-canonical works, paintings, and sculptures as part of a larger cultural matrix. Colbert detects phrenology in rarefied domains, places where the enormous condescension of posterity says it shouldn't be. Well-known nineteenth-century American fine artists--Hiram Powers, William Sidney Mount, Harriet Hosmer, Asher B. Durand, Henry Inman, William Rimmer, and Thomas Cole--and their most influential works were informed by phrenological doctrine, or were in dialogue with it. In its prime, phrenology achieved a status roughly comparable to that of psychoanalysis, and, like psychoanalysis, continued to find a respectable audience even after high science refuted many of its central claims (in the case of phrenology, the experiments of eminent French physiologists Pierre Flourens [1845] and Paul Broca [1861]). If psychoanalysis has failed to assimilate or refute the antagonistic findings of cognitive psychology and neuroscience, it remains compelling to therapists, patients, literary theorists, novelists, historians, and filmmakers because it provides a satisfyingly complex narrative of self development, a rich vocabulary of subject formation. Similarly, as an authoritative vocabulary of characterological description, phrenology continued for many decades to be deployed by novelists, theologians, sculptors, and painters--even by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., professor of anatomy at Harvard, who scattered phrenological descriptions and essays, despite utterly rejecting the scientific validity of the doctrine. Phrenology was in the air, you had to breathe it, and it often had intoxicating effects.

The bulk of *A Measure of Perfection* is taken up with a wild thicket of close readings of specific mid-nineteenth-century sculptures and paintings, set next to meticulously researched accounts of the activities of their creators, patrons, audiences, and phrenological influencers. The method is simple: Colbert demonstrates that the subject had the means, the opportunity and the motive to commit phrenology, and in many cases produces a signed confession (in the form of correspondence to a patron or friend, a published commentary by the artist, etc.). Colbert asks (and answers): How did the artist and patron regard the work? How did contemporary critics and viewers? What immediate phrenological influences and themes were close at hand? What lectures did the artist attend (or might have attended)? What publications did he own or subscribe to or make reference to? In what phrenological forms and forums did representations of the piece and its creator circulate? In what esthetic forms and forums did phrenology and its procedures circulate? Colbert shows that art anatomy and drawing manuals, artists' letters, and journals devoted to art were full of phrenology and kindred doctrines; phrenological journals likewise were full of references to sculptors and sculptures, paintings and painters. Fine art took to phrenology; phrenology took to fine art.

Once the multiple links are established, phrenology turns out to be an art historian's Rosetta Stone. Individual works of art can be analyzed like a hieroglyph, easily decoded. Colbert's research demonstrates that they were intended to be read precisely in this fashion; artist, patron, and audience were immersed in the same phrenological idiom, spoke the same patois. The result is a series of fresh and authoritative interpretations of well-known and obscure pieces and genres. Where a previous generation of art historians assumed that the Hudson River School was informed by Emersonian transcendentalism, Colbert shows instead a direct phrenological connection. Where a previous generation dismissed Hi-

ram Powers' "The Greek Slave" as a derivative softcore take on classical art, Colbert produces a rich assortment of contemporary reviews, letters, etc., to show that "The Greek Slave" embodied phrenological ideals of robust femininity, figured as a phrenological critique of Greek and Renaissance sculpture (Venus de' Medici got the proportions wrong), and so on.

This approach is extremely fruitful--after Colbert you have to look at "The Greek Slave," the Hudson River School, and practically every other work of nineteenth-century American art, with new eyes--but reductionism is a danger. Colbert rejects any interpretation that reads it from an abolitionist perspective or foregrounds the slave's erotic subordination. But is that all that can be said? Surely contemporary audiences reacted to the statue ambivalently, in ways that printed discourse, or even private correspondence, may not have given full voice to. From our vantage point, it is reasonable to suspect that "The Greek Slave" could have said one thing and done another. Having thoroughly researched a private and public critical apparatus that gives detailed instructions on how to read the piece, Colbert is not one to look for double messages. But given the specificity and historicity of the readings, reductionism is not much of a problem.

The strength of *A Measure of Perfection* lies in its thick description of the uses of phrenology for nineteenth-century fine artists (and of fine art for phrenology): the encoding of abstract (moral or immoral) principles in the skull, face, body, and life narrative, of individuals. The artist (along with the phrenologist and the physician) was assigned a privileged cultural role: to precisely, scientifically, represent in his artworks the embodiment of moral, racial, sexual, national, historical character--for the moral instruction of the viewer. The body materializes in particular, scientifically discernible matrixes, the combination of abstract principles, governed by the overall laws of physiology. But social identity has always been a mov-

ing target and a joint production, one that even a protean discourse like phrenology ultimately failed to keep up with. Here, one wishes that Colbert cut back a bit on the exuberant readings of individual pieces and extended his analysis outward to the broader cultural and social significance, uses, and trajectory of phrenology. Particularly lacking is any periodization of phrenology, its circulation among different social classes and different professional settings, its relation to kindred and competing doctrines and to its critics. Colbert picks and chooses from different decades and authors and domains. Evidence from the 1880s (a low-brow Zeus Franklin text), and the 1890s (a Winslow Homer doodle) butt up against middle- and high-brow evidence from the 1830s, 40s and 60s. This demonstrates the longevity and consistency of phrenological doctrines, but the opportunity for historicizing phrenology, even confined to the domain of fine art, is lost. The end of the story is not narrated: we have the rise but not the fall.

Phrenology ultimately came to be accounted by artists as a crude, plebeian, embodied, irrational thing. Phrenology's debarment from the canon of esthetic theory and, subsequently, scholarly consideration, was almost certainly based on an identification of phrenology with a philosophically vulgar materialism, an esthetically vulgar commercialism, and a socially vulgar audience: phrenology in bodifying abstract principle became tainted by body; phrenological readings were too easy to stage and too easy to read, and came to be regarded as dime-museum entertainments with no moral purpose. Emersonian transcendentalism, in contrast, was purged of tropes that referenced the body and was full of abstract moral purpose; transcendentalism, never the sport of plebes, became the sport of scholars. The question then arises: If scholars now and for over a hundred years have dismissed phrenology as a cultural waste product, how did this come to pass? On this point, the usually talkative Colbert is silent; he argues against the "particular reticence

of art historians" (p. 2) to grapple with phrenology, but doesn't name or quote or analyze them. In so doing, he passes up the chance to offer a historical account of the academy's "curious" refusal to acknowledge (or determination to erase evidence of) phrenology's influence on fine art, architecture, and literature. What does that refusal tell us, other than that the scholarship is wrong?

Another problem: The relation of phrenology to other discourses of mind and body, other sciences, religions and movements. "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing," said the seventh-century B.C. poet Archilochus and, in our own century, Isaiah Berlin. Colbert is a hedgehog, but is phrenology one big thing? The mid-nineteenth century was an extremely fertile era in American culture, a period in which isms, ologies, and reforms proliferated: dress reform, abolitionism, popular anatomy, revivalism, dietary physiology, hydropathy, homeopathy, mesmerism, temperance, electromedicine, spiritualism, moral reform, free love, free thought, botanical medicine, utopian socialism, etc. These enthusiasms imbued each other, comingling in both discourse and adherents, while often contradicting each other in key ways. What we want to know is how one fed off another, how one supported another, or how one offshoot deprived another of light and soil (in many cases there was a particular succession). Colbert tends to lump them together under the sign of phrenology, elides the differences or tensions between them.

This may seem a quibble, given the fact that the *American Journal of Phrenology* and other phrenological publications, lectures, and presses included much more than just phrenology. Phrenologers were cultural sponges, soaking up everything around them, but so were popular anatomists and spiritualists and utopian socialists and moral reformers. How much, then, of Colbert's phrenology is really phrenological? A lot, but not everything. William A. Alcott, a popular anatomical author and educational reformer of

the antebellum period, recommended that his readers should "study" George Combe's *Constitution of Man* "with great care," but allowed that they might "Reject, if you choose, his Phrenology." [1] What Alcott valued in Combe was the principle of regulatory physiological "laws of organization," and his emphasis on self-formation and reformation, sustaining themes in the works of many American writers on body and self, and notions that preceded Combe, although he greatly popularized them. *The Constitution of Man* had an immense impact, but so did Paley's *Natural Theology*, Alcott's *The House I Live In* and numerous advice books, the Bridgewater treatises, and Sylvester Graham's publications and lectures on physiology. These works were influences on, and in some cases influenced by, phrenology, but they were not phrenology. Colbert tends to stuff too many doctrines into his phrenological black box. (The confusion, however, is understandable: some of the material Colbert quotes from the Fowlers and other phrenological sources are close paraphrases of Alcott and Graham.)

But not to make too much of this. *A Measure of Perfection* is rich and messy and insightful. Colbert amply demonstrates the multiple ways in which nineteenth-century fine art is imbued with the enthusiasms of the period, and proves that a knowledge of them is essential. The book explodes with juicy detail—the chapters are almost impossible to synopsise. For the moment, and maybe a long time to come, Colbert's book is the state of the art for cultural historians and students of American Studies, and especially art historians, who now are obliged to know their phrenology (and every other enthusiasm of the period). Those looking for a roadmap to phrenology or nineteenth-century American culture will have to look elsewhere; the joy of *A Measure of Perfection* lies in the way it saturates the reader with phrenological texts and acts and objects and careers.

Notes

[1]. *Library of Health* 1 (1837): 130.

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