



A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America (Cultural Studies of the United States)

Charles Colbert

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Despite its widespread popularity in antebellum America, phrenology has rarely been taken seriously as a cultural phenomenon. Charles Colbert seeks to redress this neglect by demonstrating the important contributions the theory made to artistic developments in the period. He goes on to reveal the links between the tenets of phrenology and the cultural ideals of Jacksonian democracy. As Colbert demonstrates, virtually every important figure of the American Renaissance expressed some opinion of phrenology, whether or not they embraced it. Its proponents included many artists eager to support a cause that enhanced the status of their profession by endowing the human form with extraordinary significance. Colbert reviews the careers of Hiram Powers, William Sidney Mount, Harriet Hosmer, Asher B. Durand, and Thomas Cole, among others, in light of their responses to phrenology. Powers's *Greek Slave*, for example, can be seen as a model of the physical and moral perfection available to those who adopted the phrenological program, a series of dictates on everything from diet to mental and physical exercise. By creating portraits, genre scenes, ideal figures, and even landscapes that embodied the theory's teachings, Colbert shows, artists endeavored to enlist their audience in a crusade that would transform the nation.

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