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# ASA AMES AND THE ART OF PHRENOLOGY

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BY STACY C. HOLLANDER

**Phrenological Head:** *Attributed to Asa Ames; Circa 1850; Polychromed Eastern white pine; 16 1/8 x 13 x 7 1/8". Courtesy of Museum of American Folk Art, New York; Bequest of Mrs. Arthur Virgin.*

Washington, 5 April, 1839

... as Cicero says, that he wonders how two Roman augurs could ever look each other in the face without laughing, I have felt something of the same surprise, that two learned phrenologists can meet without the like temptation...

John Quincy Adams<sup>1</sup>

In 1981, the Museum of American Folk Art received a rather unusual bequest: The wonderful carved wooden bust of a somber young girl with a phrenological map depicted on her skull was gladly accepted into the collection, but no purpose or reason behind the carving was immediately apparent. A phrenological connection has finally been discovered that provides at least a link between the probable sculptor of the bust, Asa Ames, and the nineteenth century movement known as phrenology.

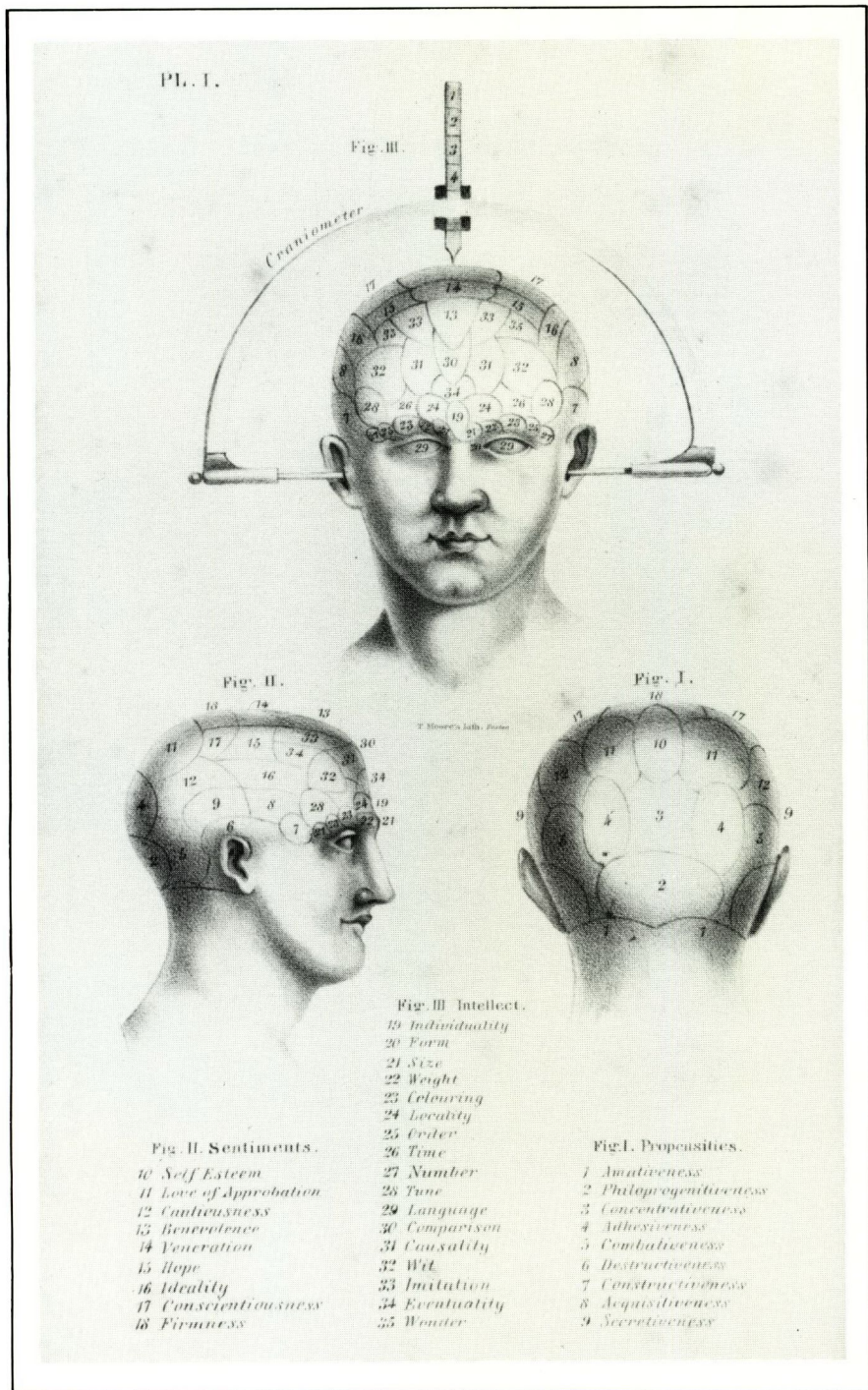
Phrenology may have inspired only caustic sarcasm in some, like John Quincy Adams, but in countless other Americans it inspired a nearly religious conviction. At its height, the influence of phrenology in America extended from an elite intelligentsia to a nearly illiterate rural population. This influence was manifested in many ways, but the phrenological bust attributed to Asa Ames remains one of the most intriguing and beautiful testimonies to this movement in American history. To understand the climate that produced this expression of faith, one must examine popular phrenology and its penetra-



Photo: Helga Photo Studio



Craniometer used for measuring the area of development of the phrenological "organs." Courtesy of Yale Medical Historical Library, New Haven, Connecticut.



tion into the grassroots of American life.

Phrenology was conceived by a Viennese medical student, Franz Joseph Gall, who observed that fellow students with excellent memories had prominent eyes. Based upon this perception and corroborating studies, Gall devised an entire physiological and psychological system with the premise that behavior, intellect and talent were determined and controlled by specific areas of the brain.<sup>2</sup> Gall offered his first series of lectures in Vienna in 1796 and by 1804 had joined forces with his favorite student, Dr. Johanne Spurzheim.

Gall's investigation of phrenology was purely scientific, one of the first attempts to correlate the organ of the brain with behavioral activity and aptitudes. He devised new methods of dissection and focused the attention of the medical world on cerebral structure. Gall divided the brain into thirty-seven sections called "faculties," each controlling an area of behavior or psychological orientation.<sup>3</sup> This materialistic view of an organ generally held to be the seat of the soul startled many and caused phrenology to be considered morally subversive.<sup>4</sup> Lectures were banned in Austria, but resumed in other European countries. Gall's original premise was expanded by Spurzheim who coined the name "phrenology" to mean science of the mind and injected the evangelical idea that all men are basically good, evil stemming from physical disease and faulty development of particular faculties.<sup>5</sup>

In 1832, Spurzheim launched an ambitious American tour. Landing in New York during a cholera epidemic, he quickly departed for Yale to speak at the commencement exercises. After an exhausting six week schedule, Spurzheim became feverish and suddenly died, causing as great a stir by his death as he had by his lectures. His public autopsy at Harvard was preceded by a lecture on his teachings given by Dr. John C. Warren while James Audobon and other artists made sketches



of the departed. Thereafter, Spurzheim's brain was kept as a memento by Dr. William Grigg in his office at the Atheneum.<sup>6</sup>

Spurzheim explored the psychological implications of phrenology and developed the theory, rejected by Gall, that the size of the contours of the skull conformed to the size of the respective areas of the brain, determining the development of the faculty contained within that area. These speculations unlocked the door that was soon thrown wide open by the Fowler brothers, bringing an awareness of phrenology to every home, however remote, in nineteenth century America.

Orson Squire Fowler and Lorenzo Niles Fowler are credited with creating a practical and peculiarly American application of phrenology. The brothers practised what was considered a vulgarized form called *cranoscopy* which involved elaborate measurements of different sections of the skull. The size of the particular section was compared to a chart of their own devising; should an area be deficient, certain behavioral modifications were suggested to develop the faculty. If overdeveloped, the restraint of specific activities would render the faculty less prominent. By analysing the contours, the Fowlers promised an accurate reading of one's character. This opened a Pandora's box of possibilities from choosing a wife by the shape of her skull to Horace Greeley's suggestion in his *Tribune* that trainmen be selected by the shape of their heads in order to avoid accidents.<sup>7</sup> An endless series of self-help books ensued designed to insure marital harmony, business success, and the fulfillment of personal potential.

The Fowlers established themselves in lower Manhattan and opened their "Phrenological Cabinet" to visitors. This Cabinet contained thousands of casts, skulls, skeletons, artifacts and paintings, including cranial reproductions of famous people which were

**The Illustrated Phrenological Almanac for 1851**, one of the many periodicals published by Fowler & Wells. Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, New York.

Forty-eight pages. Price 6 1/2 cents.

# The Illustrated PHRENOLOGICAL ALMANAC

FOR  
**1851.**

BY L. N. FOWLER.

CONTAINING THE PORTRAITS AND PHRENOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF MANY EMINENT INDIVIDUALS, WITH A DEFINITION OF THE PHRENOLOGICAL ORGANS.

NEW YORK:  
FOWLERS AND WELLS, PUBLISHERS.  
CLINTON HALL, NO. 131 NASSAU STREET.  
Bauer & Palmer, Stereotypers.

compared to the skulls of animals and “savages.” Visitors could receive a reading of their own contours for a small fixed fee which included a free chart. The chart was soon expanded to sixty pages because individual notations of the various faculties were so extensive.

Most public figures were examined, with or without their actual presence or consent, aided by, “. . . a good daguerreotype, the 3/4 pose preferred.”<sup>8</sup> Mark Twain reported of his analysis, “. . . he found a cavity on one place; a cavity where a bump would have been in anybody else’s skull . . . He startled me by saying that the cavity represented a total absence of the sense of humor . . . After three months I went to him again, but under my own name this time. Once more he made a striking discovery — the cavity was gone, and in its place was a Mount Everest — figuratively speaking — 31,000 feet high, the loftiest bump of humor he had ever encountered in his lifelong experience!”<sup>9</sup>

The practical phrenology of the Fowlers was very attractive to the social reformers of the period. Horace Mann was a firm believer, as was Amelia Bloomer. The phrenologists themselves agitated strongly for much needed reforms in the penal and educational systems and were among the first to view insanity as a treatable medical and psychological condition rather than a visitation by evil spirits.<sup>10</sup> They advocated temperance and “health food,” and lectured against tight corsets, coffee and teas. The Fowlers also published extensively, allowing their authors to champion mesmerism, hydropathy, magnetism and spiritualism. Through their publications a broad spectrum of seemingly radical thought was able to filter into the backwaters of the American consciousness.

These allied movements were particularly interesting to nineteenth century itinerant artists who were often called upon to paint posthumous portraits.

**Inkwell, Phrenological Head; Maker unknown; Circa 1850-1859; Graniteware with black, gold and cobalt blue decoration; 5½" h. Courtesy of the Bennington Museum, Bennington, Vermont.**



This was accomplished by working from the corpse, family descriptions, other paintings, and later, photography. William Matthew Prior was able to parlay his beliefs into painting commissions and, “he painted portraits of children who had died in infancy, declaring that they had come from the spirit world. The practice of phrenology was another avocation.”<sup>11</sup> Joseph Whiting Stock also accepted commissions for posthumous paintings. His will indicates that he was involved with hydropathy and phrenology and that he owned several Fowler publications and a plaster head, as well as a copy of Stanley Grimes’ *Mesmerism*.<sup>12</sup> The Fowlers, themselves, felt that the insight offered through phrenology was indispensable to the artist and wrote,

“soon every artist must be a phrenologist.”<sup>13</sup>

Although the Fowlers lectured widely, they were not the only practicing phrenologists. The countryside was dotted with demonstrations of phrenology by self-professed operators. A favorite tactic used and sanctioned by the Fowlers was for the examiner to take a stranger from the audience and, blindfolded, to read his character. These dramatics convinced ever-growing segments of the rural populations that phrenology could map their talents and weaknesses, direct them in career choices, and assure their success.

Phrenology had become part of the vernacular. According to the *Boston Christian Examiner* of 1834, “Heads of chalk, inscribed with mystic numbers, disfigured every mantelpiece.”<sup>14</sup> These heads were imported from England, as they still are today, or were manufactured locally by concerns such as the Bennington potteries. The Fowlers began a secondary business of supplying the tools of phrenology: plaster casts, measuring devices and charts. Hand-carved phrenological heads were uncommon, but not unknown. The highly decorative phrenological bust in the collection of the Museum of American Folk Art, however, is especially appealing because of its portrait-like format and colorful execution.

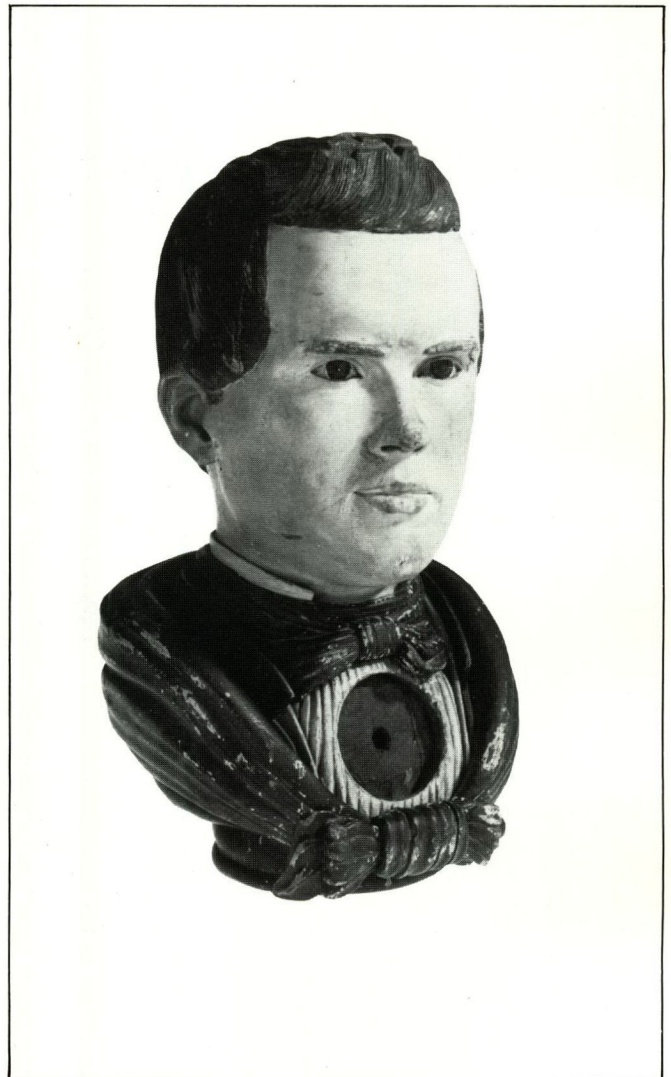
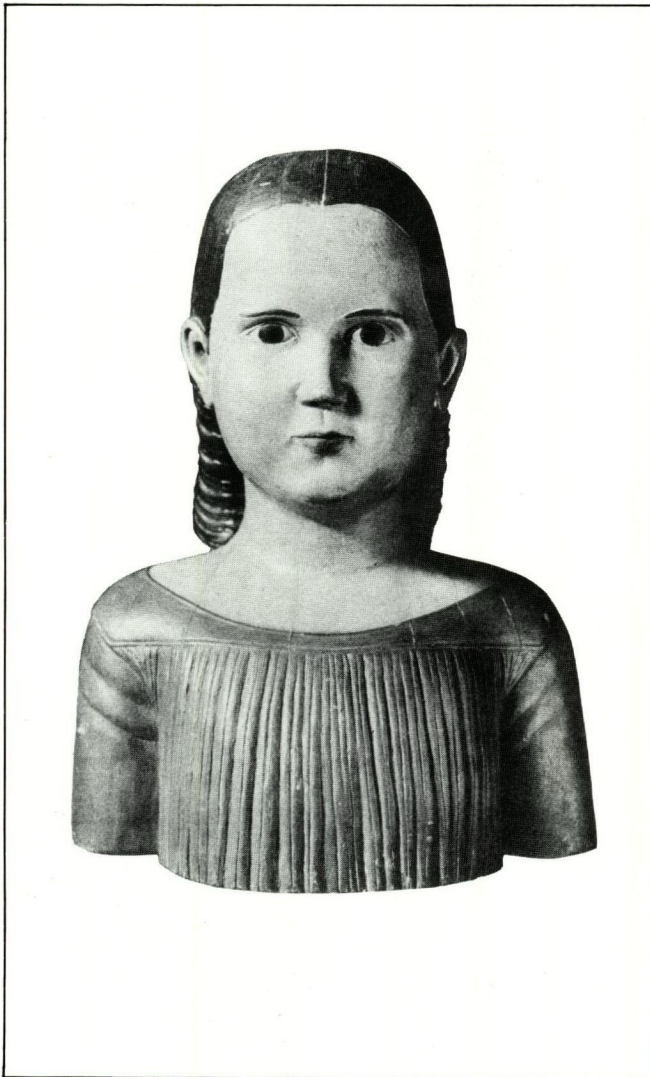
The bust is attributed to Asa Ames, a little known sculptor from upstate New York. The artist is first mentioned in the catalogue *American Folk Sculpture: The Work of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Craftsmen*, published in conjunction with a 1931 exhibition at the Newark Museum. In that catalogue, the “Bust of a Girl,” signed “A. Ames,” was incorrectly attributed to Alexander Ames, a shipcarver working in the Buffalo area. In 1977, Jack T. Ericson identified “A. Ames” as Asa Ames from the 1850 Federal Census for the town of Evans, Erie County, New York, twenty miles north of Buffalo.<sup>15</sup> Asa



**Bust of a Girl;** *Attributed to Asa Ames; 1847; Polychromed wood; 14½" h. This carving is said to be signed by Asa Ames and dated 1847.*

**Bust of a Young Man;** *Attributed to Asa Ames; Circa 1848-50; Polychromed yellow poplar; 15" h x 8⅞" w. The circular cutout on the chest is 2½" in diameter and might have held a memorial plaque or medal. Courtesy of Huntington Museum of Art, Huntington, West Virginia.*

Photo: American Folk Art in Wood, Metal and Stone: Dover Publications, Inc.: New York, 1948.



Ames worked in a distinctive style which derived from the shipcarving tradition. His sculpted portraits, mostly of children, are both frontal and direct. The children all have broad foreheads and uncompromising eyes which Ames characteristically carved deeply under

heavy brows, the eyelashes painted as a series of dots. The ears are well modeled and the hair is carved in a precise linear pattern. Ames was consistent in his handling of the small, snub noses and generous mouths of his young subjects. His last main concern was

with the drapery of the costume which he carved in a concrete and exact manner. Ames' work has been appropriately likened to that of the itinerant portraitists and displays a similar straightforward sensibility. Despite his formulaic approach, however, each

sculpture manages to convey a deep sense of the individuality of its subject and reveals some of the gravest and most respectful likenesses of children created in the folk genre.

It has been suggested that little development is shown in Ames' work, which approximately spans the period 1847-1850. However, the competency of the extant works belies the young age of the artist and indicates a great potential for the mature development of his skills,<sup>16</sup> which he never had a chance to realize since he died the following year. The memorial carving of Sarah Reliance and Ann Augusta Ayer reflects the growing sentimentality of the Victorian age in its symbolic use of the lamb and salver. An inscription on the back relates the sad history of the death of the two young sisters at the ages of one and three, respectively. The artist's name and the date is clearly inscribed around the base of the memorial. A child's doll has recently been located which may also have been carved by Ames. The doll exhibits many of the characteristics by which Ames' work is identified: The snub nose, wide mouth, and elaborately carved hair. Although the doll is not as finely carved as the full-scale portraits, this may be attributable to size, or it may simply be unfinished. However, the shape of the doll's face and hands and general dimensions of the figure are consistent with Ames' other carvings, particularly the memorial to Sarah Reliance and Ann Augusta Ayer.

The phrenological bust is perhaps the most interesting of Ames' carvings. It was introduced at the Brooklyn Museum in the 1948 exhibition, "Popular Art in America." The sculpture portrays a young girl in a simple red dress with draped neckline and short, puffed sleeves. The body is handled in Ames' typical fashion, compact and static. The work exhibits the same concentration on the drapery and features of the face as his other works and could be a

**Figurehead from bark *Soloman Piper*; Maker unknown; Mid-nineteenth century; Wood; 30" h.**  
*Courtesy of Peabody Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.*



specific portrait. The distinguishing mark of this work, however, is the colorfully mapped head depicting the thirty-seven phrenological organs. Each area is delineated by a shallow incised line and is painted and marked with a particular phrenological function

in a cursive hand, closely following the Fowler chart.

It is not known precisely when or for whom this head was made but correspondence with the town historian of Evans suggests a phrenological connection evidenced in the form of un-

**Seated Female Figure with Lamb and Cup; Asa Ames; Dated 1850; Polychromed yellow poplar; 29¼ x 12¼ x 12" (including base). Courtesy of Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Purchased with funds bequeathed by Roscoe Nelson Gray in memory of Roscoe Nelson Dalton Gray and Rene Gabrielle Gray.**

Photo: E. Irving Blomstrann



published diaries of Elliott Stewart. Stewart was a prominent man in the area — a Buffalo lawyer, a farmer, a writer and, later in life, a non-resident

professor at Cornell University. His diaries of 1858-9 include numerous allusions to a Dr. Marvin and his family.

The Federal Census of 1850 locates Ames in the household of Dr. Harvey Marvin with his occupation listed as “sculpturing.” Dr. Marvin probably moved to Evans sometime between 1846 and 1849 and enjoyed some popularity in the community.<sup>1</sup> He was a firm believer in phrenology, spiritualism, magnetism and hydropathy and had plans to build a house for water-cure patients. The house was built, but never used because of a series of events which turned popular opinion against Dr. Marvin and his teachings.

May 4, 1858

Dr. Marvin and wife called & took dinner with us at 2 P.M. The Dr. was in good spirits and we had a pleasant conversation on various topics. He gave an account of the persecution he had received since (sic) he built his house for water-cure patients. It seems that a clergyman who preached at Jerusalem (East Evans) some 5 years ago, took offense at some of his opinions and took occasion to abuse Mrs. M. in a Sunday School, at which Dr. Marvin reproved him. This was repeated at another time, when the Dr. told him he was a liar, after this this clergyman told his friends that the Dr. had a league with the Devil & that if anyone shook hands with him the Devil might get a permanent hold on him through the Dr. This declaration of Morse (David Morse was preacher at First Church of Evans 1850-52), the clergyman had so much effect, that persons who had previously been the Dr.'s friends, now they avoided him and would not meet him for fear they would come in contact and thereby deliver themselves to the Devil. The result has been that the Dr. himself has been all broken up, and he has not been able to use the house for the purpose intended. Such folly can hardly be believed possible in an enlightened community. But superstition is as powerful as ever. His enemies told every ridiculous story they could invent in reference to his experiments in Spiritualism, and nothing is too absurd for people to believe in reference to what they do not want to understand.<sup>18</sup>

On December 20, 1858, Stewart attended an evening lecture on phrenology, delivered in Buffalo by the Fowlers. The entries continue to discuss Dr. Marvin and his troubles and mention his increasingly philosophical attitude towards the community.

Sept. 12

Went to Dr. Marvins & stayed till 4 P.M. Had an interesting conversation with him on various topics, among which were Magnetism & Spiritualism. The Dr. is becoming quite conservative. He is now willing to wait for the world to progress at its leisure. He is now in a condition of mind to investigate coolly and I have no doubt, is forming very rational conclusions."<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Marvin left Evans and died in 1870 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Town tradition maintains that Ames had tuberculosis and was under Dr. Marvin's care.<sup>20</sup> The close relationship between Ames and Dr. Marvin logically suggests that the phrenological head was made during their association. It is possible that the head was carved for use in Dr. Marvin's proposed water-cure establishment and may have been modelled after Dr. Marvin's daughter Frances, whose age was given as seven at the time of the 1850 census. It is not so unusual that Ames would evince an interest in the water-cure, which promised relief from virtually every adverse physical condition. Joseph Whiting Stock, who also suffered from tuberculosis, explored the same path in his search for a cure. They were both, of course, unsuccessful. Stock died of the disease in 1855 at the age of thirty-seven and Ames died in 1851 at age twenty-seven years, seven months and seven days according to his tombstone in the Evans Center Cemetery.

Today phrenology has been relegated to the province of palm readers and occult stores, but the phrenological bust by Asa Ames speaks eloquently of

**Doll;** *Attributed to Asa Ames; Circa 1848-50. Carved wood head, hands and feet, linen cloth body; 26 x 27½ x 5¼". Courtesy of the Museum of American Folk Art, New York. Promised bequest of Dorothy and Leo Rabkin.*



Photo: Richard P. Meyer.

a time when people believed that history and personal fortune could be predicted and molded by the bumps on their heads.

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#### NOTES

1. "To Dr. Thomas Sewall," April 5, 1839, *An Examination of Phrenology in Two Lectures*, Thomas Sewall, M.D., (Boston: D.S. King, 1839), ii.
2. Dr. Gall made countless case studies of groups of people distinguished by a particular talent or by aberrant behavior. He examined poets, musicians, artists, statesmen, criminals and the insane searching for common causative denominators. It was partially through these studies that he was able to divide the brain into its separate phrenological organs.
3. The "practical phrenologists" examined the contours of the skull to determine the character of each subject. They believed that the larger the area of the cranium, the more highly developed that particular faculty. This was an application undreamed of by Dr. Gall whose goal was a scientific investigation and understanding of cerebral structure and of the organic interaction between brain function and behavior. In this capacity, phrenology affected the early directions of both neurology and physical anthropology.
4. Phrenology was condemned by the Austrian government as materialistic, and undermining the religious and moral fiber of the nation. This accusation dogged phrenology throughout Europe and followed the science across the Atlantic to America where the science was virtually denounced by the fundamentalist clergy.
5. John D. Davies, *Phrenology, Fad and Science*, Diss., Yale, 1955, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p.8.
6. Davies, p.17.
7. Davies, p.50.
8. Davies, p.48.
9. Letter received from Paul D' Ambrosio, October 26, 1987.
10. For an extensive discussion of this aspect of phrenology, see Davies, pp.79-105.
11. Grace Adams Lyman, "William Matthew Prior, The 'Painting Garret' Artist," *The Magazine Antiques*, November, 1934. p.180.
12. Juliette Tomlinson, *The Paintings and Journal of Joseph Whiting Stock*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), pp. 56-7.
13. Mary Black, "Phrenological Associations," *The Clarion*, Spring, 1984, p.47.
14. Davies, p.12.
15. Jack T. Ericson, "Asa Ames, sculptor," *The Magazine Antiques*, September, 1982, p.523.
16. Black, p.52.
17. Letter received from Mrs. Annette Frost, November 16, 1987.
18. Excerpt from unpublished diaries of Elliott Stewart, contained in letter received by author from Mrs. Annette Frost, November 16, 1987.
19. *Ibid.*, diary entry for September 12, 1858.
20. Letter received from Mrs. Annette Frost, November 16, 1987.