



An Organ of Murder

Crime, Violence, and Phrenology in Nineteenth-Century America

by Courtney E. Thompson

DESCRIPTION

Finalist for the 2022 Cheiron Book Prize

An Organ of Murder explores the origins of both popular and elite theories of criminality in the nineteenth-century United States, focusing in particular on the influence of phrenology. In the United States, phrenology shaped the production of medico-legal knowledge around crime, the treatment of the criminal within prisons and in public discourse, and sociocultural expectations about the causes of crime. The criminal was phrenology's ideal research and demonstration subject, and the courtroom and the prison were essential spaces for the staging of scientific expertise. In particular, phrenology constructed ways of *looking* as well as a *language* for identifying, understanding, and analyzing criminals and their actions. This work traces the long-lasting influence of phrenological visual culture and language in American culture, law, and medicine, as well as the practical uses of phrenology in courts, prisons, and daily life.

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AUTHOR/EDITOR BIOGRAPHY

COURTNEY E. THOMPSON is an assistant professor of the history of science and medicine and U.S. women's history at Mississippi State University in Starkville. She received her Ph.D. from the program in the history of science and medicine of Yale University in 2015.

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