The Phenomenon of Phrenology

The basic idea upon which phrenology rests is that the form of the head represents the form of the brain and thus reflects the brain’s relative development. The Austrian physician Franz Joseph Gall—very much interested in the works on physiognomy by the Italian Renaissance scholar Giambattista Della Porta—formulated his phrenologic theory at the end of the eighteenth century.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century interest in phrenology grew rapidly. People used the advice of phrenologists for all sorts of things, including the diagnosis of mental illness or psychological afflictions. Phrenology seriously attracted the likes of G. W. F. Hegel, Honoré de Balzac, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, James Garfield, Thomas Edison, Walt Whitman, and Queen Victoria.