

**SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
IN HISTORY**

SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN HISTORY

By

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To Marty, Chris, and Kelly

PREFACE

This book was written to provide an overview of major historical contexts and to describe how historical occurrences shaped the nature of disabilities. It introduces the reader to the topic of the social history of people with disabilities and provides basic background information on disability in prior centuries. It presents major notions for understanding general social trends regarding people with disabilities. The book provides an overview of some of the major trends that directly influenced people with disabilities. It was written to increase our knowledge and consciousness of presentations of people with disabilities and to fuel further inquiries on the topic. Many of our contemporary images and ideas about people with disabilities cannot be applied to people with disabilities who lived in earlier times. Other images and ideas can be traced back to earlier ideas about the nature of disabilities and the people who have them. It has been my hope to present the rich texture of presentation regarding disability from earlier times in such a way that images of people with disabilities are more meaningful to people with disabilities, scholars, and other readers of this book.

It provides a general survey of how people with disabilities were perceived in western history. It draws on art, literature, and historical information from earlier times. The span of time selected for study focuses on the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. The period of the Middle Ages was selected because it represents a watershed of ideas regarding people with disabilities and significant changes in artistic representations of all people, including people with disabilities. In prior centuries individuals were relatively insignificant and artistic images were relatively sterile. The church exercised so much control over art and literature, that individuality found little representation. The Middle Ages represents a period of change in both artistic techniques and attitudes toward people with disabilities. It was at the close

of the Middle Ages that artists and authors began to portray the individual characteristics of people with disabilities. During the Middle Ages artists began to present detailed and individualistic characteristics of their human subjects. The late Middle Ages gave rise to the use of perspective, as human subjects began to be presented in natural contexts. The thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries saw increased effort to depict subjects as individuals and as they actually appeared (Hofstatter, 1968). People with disabilities were included in this shift but stereotypes and traditions continued to influence the manner in which artists and authors represented them. The Middle Ages also represent an interesting time regarding the social interpretations and relationships between people with disabilities and those without, although many people acquired disabilities during the life span.

When the Middle Ages came to a close and the Renaissance flowered, a new orientation on life developed. Life in this world took on a new importance. The focus on the individual that emerged with the Renaissance brought attention to people and their characteristics. Some of the humanist focus brought about by the Renaissance also affected notions and images of people with disabilities. As societies turned toward understanding humankind, a natural curiosity grew about people with disabilities. People with disabilities increasingly became the subject of art and literature. Art during the Renaissance and particularly that of the later northern Renaissance sheds much light on how people with disabilities were perceived and treated by their respective societies. The centuries that followed the Middle Ages and Renaissance were characterized by accelerated social change and social upheaval, which in turn caused dramatic changes in many perceptions about people with disabilities.

The study ends with the nineteenth century for several reasons. First, the nineteenth century represents century of great importance to people with disabilities. This was the century of Darwinism and major scientific breakthroughs that changed some of the paradigms used to interpret the nature of disabilities. This was the century that led to many reforms in the care and treatment of people with disabilities. It was the century that fostered some of the stereotypes about people with disabilities that have only recently been challenged in contemporary society. The study's scope does not continue through the twentieth century because there already exists a considerable body of information about people with disabilities during the twentieth century.

The twentieth century is one in which considerable legislative, medical, and legal materials are available. While the twentieth century is undoubtedly an important one, it needs to be addressed as a separate topic.

Some historians and scholars may take issue with the broad scope of this work, suggesting that significant details and subtleties will be lost in a book covering the Middle Ages and ending in the nineteenth century. They may also argue that each region, with its unique traditions and culture, or each of the periods or centuries encompassed in this book deserves intensive, thorough coverage in a separate volume. All of these points have merit but this work is not intended to be a detailed or period specific piece but an introduction to some of the basic presentations of people with disabilities over the centuries. Only by studying presentations and images of people with disabilities over such a lengthy period is it possible to determine whether these views and presentations were short-term or lasting. No other work presents such a broad social overview on which more detailed studies can be based. While there are many excellent texts on specific disabilities, works that cover a broad range are absent. This study is meant to be a survey of the social landscape and a catalyst for further research.

Although this book might, in the eyes of some, represent a sizable effort at covering the topic of disability, it in no way fully covers the topic. Nor does the book represent all of the experiences that people with disabilities have had over the centuries. Rather it, to borrow a cliché, only scratches the surface. Anyone who decides to study the topic should be prepared for great voids in information. Hopefully this study helps fill some of the previous voids.

HERBERT C. COVEY

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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Preface</i>	vii
Chapter 1. The Changing Social Contexts of Disabilities	3
2. People with Physical Disabilities	45
3. People with Leprosy	89
4. People Who Were Mentally Ill	123
5. People Who Were Blind	163
6. People Who Were Deaf	195
7. People Who Had Developmental Disabilities	235
Epilogue	273
References	279
<i>Name Index</i>	293
<i>Subject Index</i>	305

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Bruegel the Elder, *Charitas*, 1559, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

Figure 2. Francisco Goya, *Something Rare*, captioned “Mother showing her deformed child to two women,” 1814-1817, Louvre, Paris.

Figure 3. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Cripples*, 1568, Louvre, Paris.

Figure 4. Jacques Callot from his series of etchings entitled *Vagabonds, Crippled Beggar*, early seventeenth century, Biblioth que Nationale, Paris.

Figure 5. Hieronymous Cock, *Beggars*, mid sixteenth century, Philadelphia Museum of Art: SmithKline Beecham Corp. Fund for the Ars Medica Collection, Philadelphia.

Figure 6. Thomas Rowlandson, (*Mathew Bramble’s Trip to Bath: The Circus Hill, Mathew Bramble’s Overturn*, 1766, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Figure 7. Francisco Goya, Captioned “He carries his patrimony in his sack of flesh,” c. 1803-1824, Prado, Madrid.

Figure 8. Th odore G ricault, *A Paralytic Woman*, 1821, The Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts, SmithKline Beecham Corp. Fund for the Ars Medica Collection, Philadelphia.

Figure 9. Jose Ribera, *The Clubfoot or Boy with a Club-Foot*, 1642, Louvre, Paris.

Figure 10. Johannes Wachtin, 1517 woodcut from Hans Gersdorff’s *Feldtbuch de Wundartznev*, The Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts: SmithKline Beecham Corp. Fund for the Ars Medica Collection, Philadelphia.

Figure 11. Raphael Sanzio, *The Cripple*, early sixteenth century, Vatican Museum, Rome.

Figure 12. Jacques Callot, *Lieure Varie* Figure Gobbi, New York Public Library, New York.

Figure 13. Annibale Carracci, *Hunchback*, 16th-17th centuries, The Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement, Devonshire: photograph Courtald Institute of Art.

- Figure 14. Rambert, *Debauche et Luxure*, 1851, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
- Figure 15. Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velasquez, *Don Baltazar with a Dwarf*, seventeenth century, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
- Figure 16. Margin drawing from *Exeter Pontifical*, fourteenth century, British Library, London.
- Figure 17. Nicholas Manuel Deutsch, *Saint Anne Between Saint James the Elder and Saint Roch*, 1484-1530, Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.
- Figure 18. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of a Leper*, 1523, The Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Meta and Paul J. Sachs Collection.
- Figure 19. Claes Jansz Visscher the Younger, *Procession of Lepers on Copper Monday*, 1608, Philadelphia Museum of Art, SmithKline Beecham Corp. Fund for the Ars Medica Collection, Philadelphia.
- Figure 20. Albrecht Dürer, *Melancolia I*, 1514, The Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased by Lisa Norris Elkins Fund, Philadelphia.
- Figure 21. Attributed to First Antwerp Woodcutter, *Christ Casting Out Demons*, 1487, Philadelphia Museum of Art: SmithKline Beecham Corp. Fund for the Ars Medica Collection, Philadelphia.
- Figure 22. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools*, late fifteenth century, Louvre, Paris.
- Figure 23. William Hogarth, Plate VII from *The Rake's Progress*, 1735, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- Figure 24. Wilhelm von Kaulbach, *Madhouse*, 1835, The Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Muriel and Philip Berman Gift, Philadelphia.
- Figure 25. Daniel Chodowiecki, untitled group of heads from Johann Gaspar Lavater's *Fragmente*, 1774-1778, Special Collections, University of Colorado Library, Boulder.
- Figure 26. Sir Charles Bell, *Maniac in Chains*, 1806, Wellcome Institute Library, London.
- Figure 27. Théodore Géricault, *The Insane Kleptomaniac* (also known as *The Insane Kidnapper*), c. 1822, Springfield Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts.
- Figure 28. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind*, sixteenth century, Museum of Naples.
- Figure 29. Louis-Léopold Boilly, *The Blind*, 1825, Philadelphia Museum of Art, SmithKline Beecham Corp. Fund for the Ars Medica Collection, Philadelphia.
- Figure 30. Sir John Everett Millias, *The Blind Girl* 1856, Published by permission of Birmingham City Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham, England.

- Figure 31. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Blind Beggar*, about 1564, Kupferstichkabinett, Dresden.
- Figure 32. Unknown artist, *Austria - A Cafe for Deaf Mutes in Vienna*, Nineteenth Century, Gallaudet University Archives, Washington, DC.
- Figure 33. Unknown artist, Illustration from the *Prayer Book of Hildegard of Bingen*, late twelfth century, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.
- Figure 34. Raphaël, *The Dumb Woman*, 1506, National Gallery of Urbino.
- Figure 35. Jacob de Gheyn, *Master and Pupil*, 1599, Manchester City Art Galleries, Manchester, England.
- Figure 36. Unknown artist, Abbe Epée, Date unknown, Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris, Paris France.
- Figure 37. Unknown artist, *J.R. Pereire and His Pupil Marie Marois*, Unknown, Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris, Paris France.
- Figure 38. Unknown artist, *Treatment by Electricity*, 18th Century France, Institut National de Jeunes Sourds. Paris, Paris France.
- Figure 39. Unknown artist, *Illustrating the Lord's Prayer with Signs*, nineteenth century, Gallaudet University Archives, Washington, DC.
- Figure 40. Daniel Chodowiecki, untitled group of people from Johann Gaspar Lavater's *Fragmente*, 1774-1778, Special Collections, University of Colorado Library, Boulder.
- Figure 41. Daniel Chodowiecki, untitled plate of girl from Johann Gaspar Lavater's *Fragmente*, 1774-1778, Special Collections, University of Colorado Library, Boulder.
- Figure 42. Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velasquez, *The Jester Calabazas*, c. 1633, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund, 1965.15, Cleveland, Ohio.
- Figure 43. Unknown artist, *Wild Boy of Aveyron*, unknown, Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris, Paris France.

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Historical Roots and Conceptualising Disability. Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities. Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities. National and International Perspectives. Chapter. 2 - Historical Roots and Conceptualising Disability. from Part 1 - Social Inclusion and Disability. Arie Rimmerman. Publisher: Cambridge University Press. Limited literature in disability history, however, continues to pose a great challenge to students of disability studies in their endeavor to trace the development and formation of perceptions towards persons with disabilities. It is towards this end that this article seeks to present a coherent literature review on cross-cultural factors that influence perceptions towards children and adults with disabilities from a historical perspective. Diversifications in perception of persons with disabilities exist in Ghana as they do in other places in Africa. In addition to other perceptions, social attitudes towards persons with disabilities are reflected in the family, which teaches by example customs and institutionalized values. This book will help to develop a social history on disabilities by providing a multidisciplinary overview of images of people with disabilities in In recent years, there has been an abundance of literature written on the subject of people with disabilities. However, there has been a noticeable paucity of information available on the historical aspects of disabled persons. literature can be used to understand how disabled people were perceived in their respective times; and showing how historical factors shape some of our current perceptions about disability. The social construction of disability comes from a paradigm of ideas that suggest that society's beliefs about a particular community, group or population are grounded in the power structures inherent in a society at any given time. These are often steeped in historical representations of the issue and social expectations surrounding concepts such as disability, thereby enabling a social construct around what society deems disabled and healthy.