



# THE APOTHEOSIS OF WASHINGTON BY CONSTANTINO BRUMIDI

## Introduction

In the center of the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol is a fresco entitled the *Apotheosis of Washington*. Created by the artist Constantino Brumidi in 1865, this artwork was completed over the course of 11 months at the end of the Civil War. The fresco depicts George Washington ascending to the heavens, surrounded by female figures representing Liberty/Authority, Victory/Fame and the original 13 states. Around the edges of the fresco are 6 groups of figures representing War, Science, Marine, Commerce, Mechanics, and Agriculture.

Brumidi immigrated to the United States from Italy in 1852. By the time he began work on the *Apotheosis of Washington*, he had gained a tremendous amount of experience restoring and creating original fresco (painting on freshly laid plaster) in private homes and the Vatican. Referencing this experience, he created the original, uniquely American work at the center of the Capitol.

Through both guided and independent explorations of images of the *Apotheosis of Washington*, students discuss and develop interpretive theories related to composition and symbols referenced in the artwork. After this analysis, students further reflect by making their own original artwork. While intended for 8th grade students, the lesson can be adapted for other grade levels.



## Estimated Time

Two–three class sessions

## National Standards

### National Standards for Visual Arts

- 1—Understanding and applying media, techniques, processes
- 4—Understanding Visual Arts in relation to history and culture

### Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, grade 8

- Writing 4
- Speaking and Listening 1, 2, 4

### Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, grade 8

- Reading 4
- Writing 7

## Learning Skills

Group discussion, analysis of primary source material (artwork), vocabulary enrichment, visual expression and composition

## Essential Question

How can one interpret the *Apotheosis of Washington*? What symbols, stories and artistic approach did Constantino Brumidi employ?

## Documents and Worksheets

### Primary source material:

- High quality images of the *Apotheosis of Washington*, including artwork details:  
<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibition-hall/the-capitol-story/apotheosis>

### Secondary source material:

- Talking points for teacher-led discussion
- Worksheet for students' artwork analysis
- Information about people depicted in the painting
- Annotated webography



## Suggested Activities

- As a whole class, take a “first look” at the *Apotheosis of Washington*. Allow students to look for at least one minute without asking questions. Then, have them share their impressions. You may choose to prompt discussion with the following questions: What is happening in this image? What do you see and notice? Do you think there is a story or message being told here? If so what, and why? Acknowledge every student’s comment, and try to link and frame student observations. Remember to allow for “wait time” for students to look carefully.
- List and review student observations, sharing general background information as appropriate (reference “talking points for teacher-led discussion”). Consider that historical eras and cultural perspectives have their own common vocabulary of symbols that have meaning. For example, people living in the mid-19th Century might be familiar with the Roman gods and goddesses and the concepts they symbolized. What symbols would we use today to represent science, commerce or agriculture?
- Refocus students’ attention on the center section of the image (George Washington and the 13 female figures) and examine again. This time, add to their original observations and discuss who is represented. Do students have anything else to add? Are there new discoveries?
- In small groups or individually, students choose one of the 6 groups on the perimeter of the artwork to look at closely and respond to in writing. For the section of the artwork chosen students should consider: What is the theme represented? What gods, figures, technologies are highlighted, and what is their significance? (reference “information about people depicted in the painting” and “worksheet for students’ artwork analysis”)
- As a whole group, share what the students have written. What stories or themes are represented in aspects of the artwork (for example, the original 13 states and the leader George Washington, the importance of science and technology as American values)? What is the overall message this artwork conveys? How might Brumidi’s experience as an immigrant have influenced the choices he made (celebrating innovation, experimentation, change)?
- Students create original artwork (i.e. collage, sketch, graphic art) inspired by their investigation of the *Apotheosis of Washington*. What are their own personal understandings of American values and stories? What symbols will they use to reflect essential stories and values of their experience? What science, technology or individuals they might highlight? Share artwork and have students share the meanings of symbols and compositions they employed their work.

## Teacher Tip

Depending on the level of engagement in the “first look” section, you may want to continue to model active observation and analysis more explicitly when refocusing on the center section of the image, and use the questions for student analysis to guide the activity.



## Extended Activity

- Students research Constantino Brumidi's biography. What was his experience as an immigrant? What other work had he done previously (murals at the Vatican)? Why might he have decided to use the fresco technique in the *Apotheosis of Washington*? Students may also research works of art in Europe by Brumidi and compare approaches.
- Discuss this lesson within the context of historical events from 1776 to the 1850s. Consult text books and on-line resources for timelines of relevant events and consider the following questions: Why do you think George Washington is portrayed in this way? What message might Brumidi have hoped to convey to viewers? What was happening in the 1850s that may have influenced these decisions?

## Talking Points for Teacher-led Discussion

### What does Apotheosis mean?

The term apotheosis means the raising of a person to the rank of a god, or the glorification of a person as an ideal.

### How is George Washington depicted in the *Apotheosis of Washington*?

George Washington, honored in the 19th century as someone universally admired, is found enthroned, rising to the heavens (suggestive of the Roman god Jupiter who was often depicted seated) with a rainbow arching at his feet. Washington is clothed in military uniform. His lavender lap-robe creates a sense of classical drapery, like that seen on ancient Greek and Roman statues.

### Who are the figures next to him?

The two female figures, Liberty/Authority and Victory /Fame are symbolic figures. Authority carries a "fasces" or bundle of rods which was (in the Roman Empire) a symbol of power and authority. Liberty is wearing a red cap. Fame sounds a trumpet while Victory is shown with classical wings. Washington represented the ideal of civic virtue that was considered by the founding fathers to be critical to the success of the nation.

### Who are the 13 female figures?

The 13 female figures, each with a star, represent the original states. Those near Liberty/Authority have cotton ball wreaths, suggesting the Southern states. They are holding a banner, "E Pluribus Unum," which means "Out of Many One."

### Who was Constantino Brumidi, the artist who created the *Apotheosis of Washington*?

Born and trained in Italy, Constantino Brumidi immigrated to the U.S. in 1852 at the age of 47. By the time he started work in the U.S., he'd already gained a tremendous amount of artistic experience in painting fresco and other murals in private homes as well as the Vatican.



In the *Apotheosis of Washington*, Brumidi uses figures and symbols that reference classical gods and goddesses that are not as familiar to us today. “However, in the mid-nineteenth century the personification of abstract ideas by means of figures drawn from classical mythology and the association of historical figures such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin with these was part of the cultural vocabulary.”<sup>1</sup>

In the *Apotheosis of Washington* Brumidi created a unique canopy fresco in which he pairs classical gods and goddesses, figures from American history, and 19th century inventions.

Brumidi was aware of the architectural environment in arranging the six groups of gods and goddesses above and opposite the historical paintings and sculptured reliefs in the Rotunda.

### **What about Brumidi’s technique?**

Brumidi used the classic technique of wall painting or fresco, meaning painting on freshly laid plaster. He was a master at creating the illusion of three-dimensional images of figures on a flat surface, a technique seen in classical and Renaissance painting. The figures in the *Apotheosis* were painted to be seen from much as 180 feet away by viewers on the Rotunda floor and from as close as the balcony surrounding the eye of the dome.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Wolanin, Barbara, Constantino Brumidi, Artist of the Capitol, Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998, page 148.

<sup>2</sup> Wolanin, pages 127-149.



Information about the figures depicted in the *Apotheosis of Washington* can be found here:  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/murals/apotheosis-washington>

### War

Representing armored freedom, this female figure has a sword raised, cape flying, and a helmet and shield reminiscent of those on the Statue of Freedom. She is pictured trampling Tyranny and Kingly Power. Assisting her is a fierce eagle carrying arrows and a thunderbolt. Brumidi was painting this section at the end of the Civil War and may have expressed some of his political beliefs by alluding to confederate leaders in the figures being vanquished (Jefferson Davis, Alexander Stephens).

### Science

Minerva, goddess of wisdom and the arts of civilization, has a helmet and spear. She points to an electric generator creating power stored in batteries and is next to a printing press. Inventors Benjamin Franklin, Samuel F. B. Morse, and Robert Fulton are pictured as well.

### Marine

Holding his trident and crowned with seaweed, Neptune, god of the sea, rides in a shell chariot drawn by sea horses. Venus, goddess of love born from the sea, helps lay the transatlantic cable. In the background is a form of iron-clad ship with smokestacks.

### Commerce

Mercury, god of commerce, with his winged cap and sandals and caduceus (a winged staff entwined with two serpents), hands a bag of gold to Robert Morris, financier of the Revolutionary War. On the left, men move a box on a dolly; on the right, the anchor and sailors lead into the adjacent scene, "Marine."

### Mechanics

Vulcan, god of the forge, stands at his anvil with his foot on a cannon, near a pile of cannon balls. There is a steam engine in the background. The man at the forge is thought to represent Charles Thomas, who was in charge of the ironwork of the Capitol dome.

### Agriculture

Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, is shown with a wreath of wheat and a cornucopia (a goat's horn overflowing with produce, symbolizing prosperity), seated on a McCormick reaper. Young America in a liberty cap holds the reins of the horses, while Flora gathers flowers in the foreground.



## Questions for Student Artwork Analysis

What is the first thing you notice? Why?

What is the theme represented in your section of the artwork? How can you tell?

If you can, identify who the figures are in your scene (refer to the information sheet)?

What might be the significance of grouping these figures?

Do you think there is a story or message being told here? If so what, and why?

What values and stories are represented in aspects of the artwork? What do these say about the way America wanted to present itself to the world in the 1850s?



## Annotated Webography

<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/murals/apotheosis-washington>

Here is an overview of information related to the *Apotheosis of Washington* including a brief biography of Brumidi, details related to the painting of the Apotheosis and links to other art by Brumidi in the Capitol building. You can also download an image of the painting from this website.

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/online/the-capitol-story.html>

This element of the Capitol Visitor Center's online exhibit tells the story of the *Apotheosis of Washington* including general background information, and content and images related to the figures and vignettes around the perimeter of the piece.

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/online/1851-to-1877/the-capitol-1851-1877/a-creative-showcase.html>

From the Capitol Visitor Center's online exhibit, this webpage has a photograph of Constantino Brumidi and a detail of his painting on the ceiling of the President's Room at the Capitol building.

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/images-the-era-image/fresco-painted-constantino-brumidi>

Here is an image of a Brumidi fresco depicting negotiations during the Louisiana Purchase.

[http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/Assets/uploads/files/brochures/pdfconstantino\\_brumidi\\_lg.pdf](http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/Assets/uploads/files/brochures/pdfconstantino_brumidi_lg.pdf)

Downloadable brochure about Constantino Brumidi's life and painting techniques including information about the collection of his artwork in the Capitol building—the *Apotheosis of Washington*, the Frieze of American History, special rooms and the Brumidi Corridors.

<http://kids.clerk.house.gov/grade-school/lesson.html?intID=40>

This website has information about the *Apotheosis of Washington*, the groups around the perimeter of the main scene and a brief biography of Brumidi.