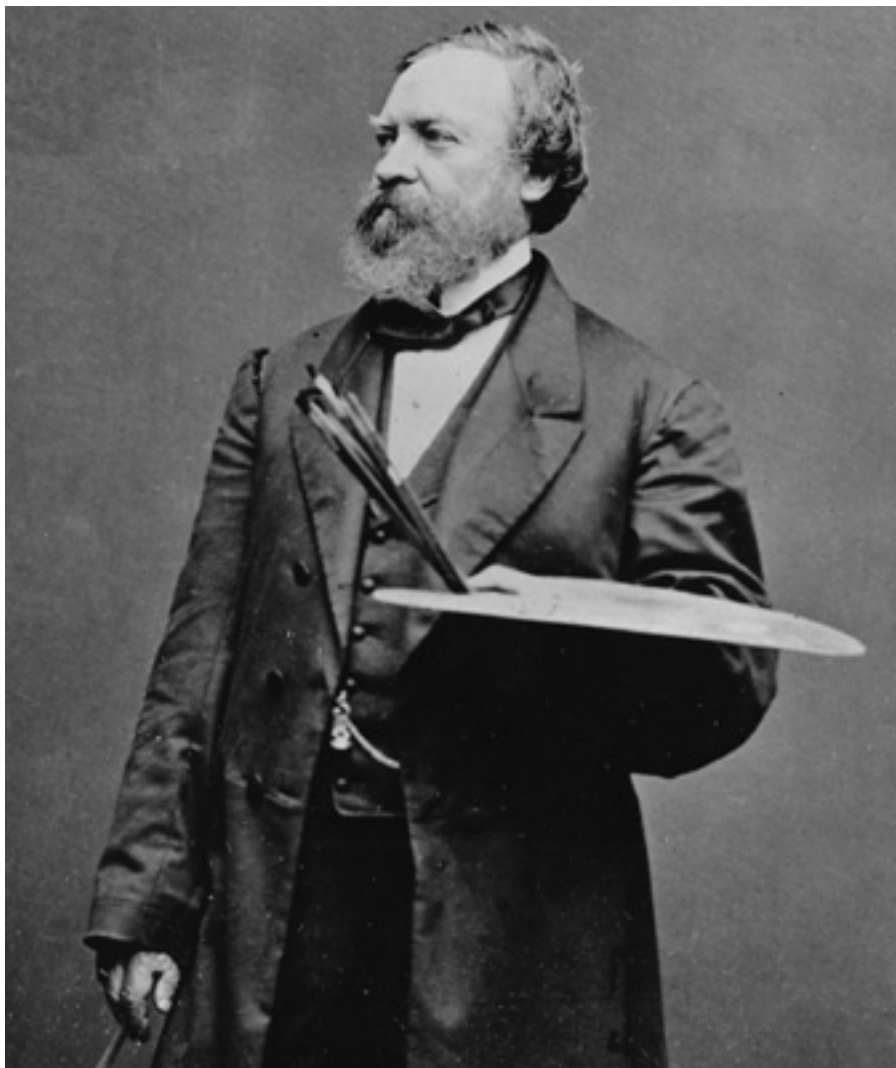


# CONSTANTINO BRUMIDI

*Artist of the Capitol*



U.S. CAPITOL

# Brumidi's Life and Painting Techniques

Constantino Brumidi (1805–1880) is primarily known for the murals he painted in the United States Capitol over a 25-year period. His artistic vision was based on the wall paintings of ancient Rome and Pompeii and on the classical revivals that occurred in the Italian Renaissance, the Baroque period, and the early 19th century.



*This 1859 photograph, taken by Montgomery Meigs, captures Brumidi's lively personality.*

Born in Rome, Brumidi was trained at the Academy of St. Luke in the full range of painting mediums, including true fresco, painted in sections on fresh plaster, and sculpture. He achieved mastery of the human figure and learned how to create the appearance of three-dimensional forms on a flat surface, an effect called *trompe l'oeil* or fool-the-eye. He painted murals for popes and princes and was considered one of the city's best artists. Caught up in the short-lived Roman republican revolution, he was imprisoned and sentenced to many years in prison, but was pardoned by the Pope with the understanding that he would be leaving for America, where he was already promised a church commission.

Arriving in New York in September 1852, he immediately applied for citizenship, which was granted in 1857. Over the years, the majority of his work outside the Capitol was for cathedrals and churches in Mexico City; New York; Philadelphia; Baltimore; Washington, D.C.; and Havana.

Beginning in 1855, Brumidi painted murals in the Capitol under the direction of Captain Montgomery C. Meigs, superintendent of construction of the Capitol extensions and dome, which was designed by Thomas U. Walter. His trial fresco in today's room H-144 was well received, and Brumidi was put on the payroll to complete the decoration of the room and to make designs for other new rooms.

Brumidi worked intensively at the Capitol through 1860. He designed and executed murals for the Hall of the House of Representatives, office and committee spaces in the House and Senate extensions, and the Senate first-floor corridors. He spent years designing and painting the canopy fresco, completed in 1865, and then periodically was hired to complete murals he had started or designed earlier.

Brumidi directed and worked with crews of painters and craftsmen, who had been trained in Italy, England, and Germany. He worked alongside German-born Emmerich Carstens, the head of the decorative painters. They created murals on the Capitol's walls and vaulted or domed ceilings

using a variety of painting mediums, from fresco, oil, and oil/casein mixtures on the walls to fresco and more fragile water-soluble tempera (or distemper) on the ceilings. Brumidi himself executed all of the historical scenes, portraits, and major allegorical figures, and only he worked in true fresco. His designs often included *trompe l'oeil* painting that looks like carved stone, marble, or brocade. Many areas were enhanced with gilding, gilded mirrors, and imitation marble

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called *scagliola*. In murals throughout the building Brumidi combined classical and allegorical subjects with portraits and scenes from American history and tributes to American values and inventions. Among his major contributions are the monumental canopy and frieze under the new Capitol dome.



▲ *Brumidi created the fresco Cornwallis Sues for Cessation of Hostilities under the Flag of Truce on a wall in the Hall of the House in 1857. It was covered for the remodeling of the hall in 1950, and in 1961 was moved to the Members' Dining Room.*

*The artist signed the strap of the dispatch case "C. Brumidi Artist Citizen of the U.S.," showing his pride in his newly granted American citizenship.*

*In 1985, the Architect of the Capitol began an ongoing program to systematically clean Brumidi's murals of grime, discolored coatings, and heavy-handed overpainting, revealing their original beauty and high quality.*

## The Apotheosis of Washington

*The Apotheosis of Washington* in the Rotunda eye of the Capitol Dome was Brumidi's most ambitious work. He painted it over 11 months at the end of the Civil War, as the new dome was being completed.

Suspended 180 feet above the Rotunda floor, it covers an area of 4,664 square feet. The figures, up to 15 feet tall, were painted to be seen from close up as well as from 180 feet below. Some of the groups and figures were inspired by classical and Renaissance images, especially by those of the Italian master, Raphael.

The word "apotheosis" means the raising of a person to the rank of a god, or the glorification of a person as an ideal; George Washington was so highly revered that the concept seemed fitting.

In the central group, Washington is flanked by two female figures, each holding symbols of two ideas: Liberty/Authority and Victory/Fame. A rainbow arches below their feet. Female figures in flowing robes symbolize the original 13 states, some holding a banner with the motto "E Pluribus Unum," Latin for "out of many, one."

Six groups of figures on the ground below are seen at the perimeter of the canopy; the following list begins below the central group and proceeds clockwise:

**War.** Bellona, depicted as Freedom in armor, defeats Tyranny and Kingly Power with her sword and shield.

**Science.** Minerva, shown with Benjamin Franklin, Robert Fulton, and Samuel F.B. Morse, points to a wheel generating electricity being stored in batteries.



**Marine.** Neptune holds his trident and Venus helps hold the transatlantic cable, which was being laid at the time the fresco was painted to carry telegraph signals to Europe.

**Commerce.** Mercury hands a bag of money to Robert Morris, financier of the American Revolution. Brumidi signed and dated this scene 1865.

**Mechanics.** Vulcan, with an anvil and forge, stands on a cannon, with a steam engine in the background.

**Agriculture.** Ceres sits on the McCormick Reaper, accompanied by Young America in a red liberty cap and Flora picking flowers. *Detail above.*



## The Frieze of American History

The frieze of the Capitol Rotunda encircling the base of the dome contains painted scenes depicting significant events of American history. The sequence of 19 scenes begins over the west door and continues clockwise.

Architect Thomas U. Walter designed the recessed belt under the new dome (built between 1855 and 1863) for relief sculpture. Eventually Brumidi was hired to paint it in true fresco using a technique known as grisaille, a monochrome of whites and browns to give the effect of sculpture. It measures approximately 8 feet in height and 300 feet in circumference. It starts 58 feet above the floor.

Brumidi created a sketch for the frieze in 1859, tracing America's history from the landing of Columbus to the discovery of gold in California. He was finally authorized to enlarge the sketch in 1877 and began painting the frieze in 1878, at age 73. While he was working on the scene "William Penn and the Indians," Brumidi's chair slipped on the scaffold platform, and he clung to a ladder for 15 minutes until he was rescued. He returned to the scaffold the next day but then worked on enlarging his remaining sketches until his death a few months later in February 1880.

Filippo Costaggini, who had also been trained in Rome, was hired to complete the remaining eight scenes using Brumidi's sketches. When he finished in 1889 there was a gap of more than 31 feet, probably due to early miscalculations about the height of the frieze. Costaggini's plan to fill it with three of his own scenes was not approved before his death in 1904.

In 1951 Allyn Cox was commissioned to design and paint three final panels. He also cleaned and retouched the other scenes. The frieze was finally completed in 1953 and dedicated the next year.

▲ **"America and History."** In the first panel that Brumidi painted, a figure representing America wears a liberty cap and holds a spear and shield. Beside her sits an Indian maiden and the figure of History. An American eagle perches on a fasces, a symbol of government authority. To the left of this group Allyn Cox painted the eagle in flight to link this scene with "The Birth of Aviation," the last scene he painted in 1953.

**"Landing of Columbus."** Christopher Columbus disembarks from the Santa Maria on a plank and is greeted by Native Americans. Brumidi's central figure seems to have been inspired by a statue of Columbus by Luigi Persico, which was then at the east central steps of the Capitol.

▼ This detail from an architectural drawing shows the frescoed Frieze of American History below the windows and The Apotheosis of Washington on the Rotunda canopy above.



## BRUMIDI'S SPECIAL ROOMS



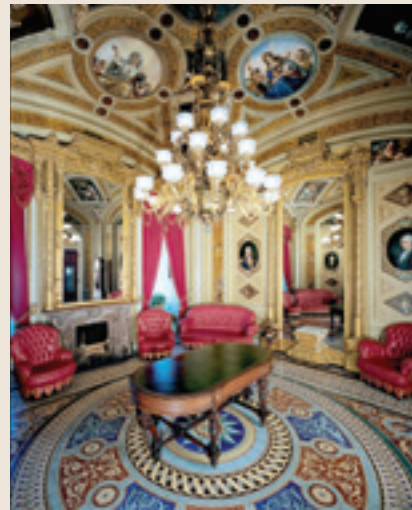
Room H-144 contains the first fresco that Brumidi painted in the Capitol. The Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow depicts a retired Roman general recalled to defend his city, a classical event often seen as parallel to the life of George Washington. On the opposite wall, he painted The Calling of Putnam from the Plow to the Revolution, another parallel scene from American history.



Room S-211, now named the Lyndon B. Johnson Room, was intended to be the Senate Library but was first used by the Senate Post Office. Brumidi's allegorical figures represent Geography, History, Telegraph, and Physics painted in true fresco.



S-213 is the Senate Reception Room, where senators meet their constituents. Brumidi's ceiling frescoes depict figures representing the virtues of Temperance, Strength, Prudence, and Justice as well as War, Liberty, Peace, and Plenty. On the upper walls are trompe l'oeil marble maidens and cherubs.



The President's Room, S-216, was used by presidents to sign legislation and is now used primarily by senators for ceremonial events. Brumidi's designs include illusionistic moldings and medallions, state seals, and frescoed allegorical and historical figures.



Marine themes in the elaborate Pompeian-style murals in room S-127, where the Senate Appropriations Committee meets, reflect its original use by the Committee on Naval Affairs. America and numerous classical gods and goddesses related to the sea are painted on the ceiling in true fresco. The pilasters and lower walls are painted to look like marble, and floating female figures holding nautical and marine objects appear in nine blue panels.



S-128, originally designed for the Senate Committee on Military Affairs and Militia, is ornately decorated with shields, emblems, and small illusionistic sculptural groups related to the Revolutionary War. Among the frescoed lunettes are depictions of the Battle of Lexington, the Boston Massacre, and Washington at Valley Forge.

## THE BRUMIDI CORRIDORS

The Brumidi Corridors are on the first floor of the Senate extension constructed between 1852 and 1859. Brumidi based his elaborate decorative scheme for the ceiling and walls on Raphael's Loggia in the Vatican.

Between 1857 and 1859, he directed the decorative painters who created a framework of illusionistic panels filled with a combination of classical figures and motifs, historical portraits, and American flora and fauna. In the lunettes over the doorways he created frescoed portraits and historical or allegorical scenes reflecting the functions of the Senate committees that met in the rooms between 1873 and 1878, when they were painted.



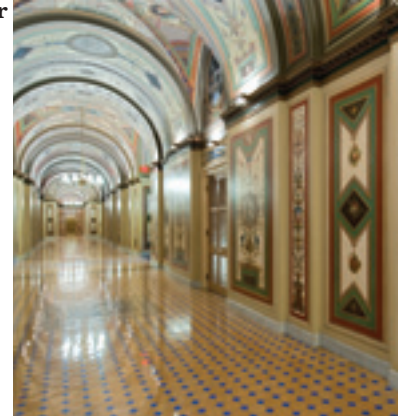
In the **West Corridor**, lunettes include *Columbus and the Indian Maiden* and *Bartholomé de Las Casas* over the doors of the Indian Affairs Committee room. *Authority Consults the Written Law* is located over the door of the

Committee on the Revision of Laws and *Bellona, Roman Goddess of War* over the door of the Military Affairs Committee. On the ceilings are landscapes and agricultural implements interspersed among the colorful framework of ornament. At the north end of the corridor the signs of the zodiac are painted on the ceiling.



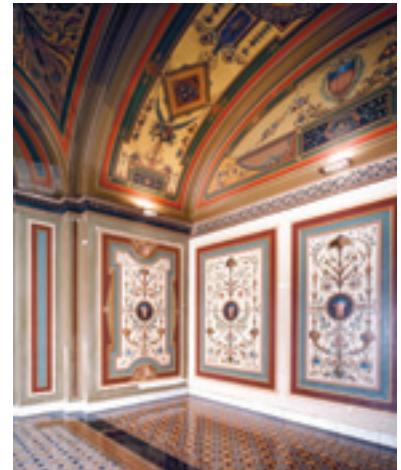
*The difference made by modern conservation is apparent in these views of a panel before (left) and after (right) the removal of overpaint and grime.*

In the **North Corridor** are colorful birds, animals, and trophies as well as medallion portraits of Revolutionary War leaders. Over the room then occupied by the Committee on Territories, Brumidi painted *Cession of Louisiana*, and over the Committee on Foreign Relations, he created *The Signing of the First Treaty of Peace with Great Britain*. Modern inventions, such as the airplane, were painted on the ceiling in the early twentieth century.



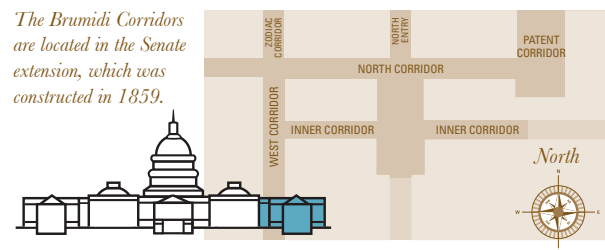
The North Entry retains its original tempera ceiling painted by Emmerich Carstens in 1875; Brumidi painted the frescoed portraits and the illusionistic marble bust in 1878. The area below is decorated with birds, landscapes, and medallions holding scenes of animals.

The Committee on Patents occupied the room on the east end of the North Corridor, now S-116. In the area now known as the **Patent Corridor**, Brumidi's frescoed lunettes depict inventors John Fitch, Benjamin Franklin, and Robert Fulton. On the ceiling, yet to be restored, are trophies of the arts and sciences.

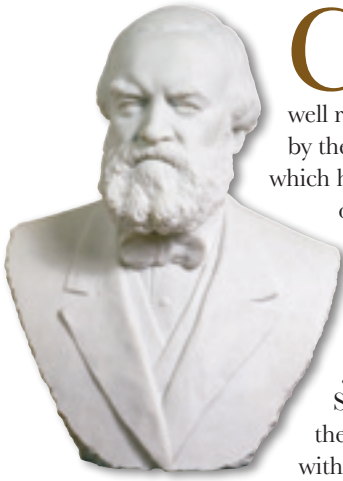


### Location of the Brumidi Corridors

*The Brumidi Corridors are located in the Senate extension, which was constructed in 1859.*



# Honoring Brumidi



Constantino Brumidi's contributions to the United States Capitol have been well recognized and appreciated by the United States Congress, which has funded the conservation of his murals over the past quarter of a century and authorized the publication of *Constantino Brumidi: Artist of the Capitol* in 1998. On July 26, 2005, the United States Congress celebrated the bicentennial of his birth with a ceremony in the Rotunda, and his work was featured in special exhibits and programs. In 2008, the Congress authorized a posthumous Congressional Gold Medal in his honor.

*The marble bust above, commissioned by the Congress from sculptor Jimilu Mason and dedicated in 1967, is displayed in the Brumidi corridors. United States Senate Collection.*

## The Constantino Brumidi Gold Medal



**Left:** On the front (or obverse) of the gold medal is a portrait of Brumidi based on a photograph taken in 1859 by Captain Montgomery Meigs, supervising engineer for construction of the Capitol extension and new dome, who hired Brumidi to paint frescoes.

**Right:** On the back (or reverse) the central ring of The Apotheosis of Washington is depicted.

### ABOUT THE COVER

*The cover illustration is a detail of a photograph of Constantino Brumidi by Mathew Brady, ca. 1866. Library of Congress.*