

Introduction



Over a span of 25 years, Constantino Brumidi (1805–1880) decorated the walls and ceilings of the United States Capitol in a manner befitting a great public building. In the Senate wing, he designed and painted murals, some in the traditional fresco medium, for important spaces such as the President’s Room, the Senate Reception Room, and the renowned Brumidi Corridors—the august hallways that today bear the artist’s name. Brumidi’s monumental fresco in the Capitol Rotunda, *The Apotheosis of Washington*, covers an impressive 4,664 square feet and yet took just 11 months to complete. His prodigious efforts at the Capitol were truly a labor of love. When Brumidi died in February of 1880, *The Washington Post* reflected: “He was the genius of the Capitol. So many of its stateliest rooms bear the touch of his tireless brush that he shall always be associated with it.”¹

Brumidi accepted his first assignment for the Capitol in December of 1854, when he was a mature 49 years of age. Having emigrated from Italy just two years earlier, the Italian-born artist arrived in Washington, D.C., as construction progressed on the Capitol extension, which comprised the Senate and House wings. Shortly thereafter, in March of 1855, a new cast-iron dome for the building was authorized. Brumidi possessed the skills, temperament, and motivation to take on the demanding challenge of designing and painting historical frescoes and decorative murals for the building's new interiors. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1857, and in later years, was something of a fixture at the Capitol. Members of the press and visitors to the building often observed "Signor Brumidi" at work and engaged the amiable artist in conversation about the subjects of his paintings.

During the two and a half decades that Brumidi ornamented the Capitol with his "tireless brush," he worked through 6 presidents' terms and 13 Congresses, and the young nation grew from 31 to 38 states. Changes in administration, controversies about his decorative style, the turmoil of the Civil War, and his own advancing age did not deter him from his life's work. Brumidi's son Laurence reflected on his father's efforts: "All labor was given freely out of pride in the Capitol Building of the United States and love for the land of his adoption."²

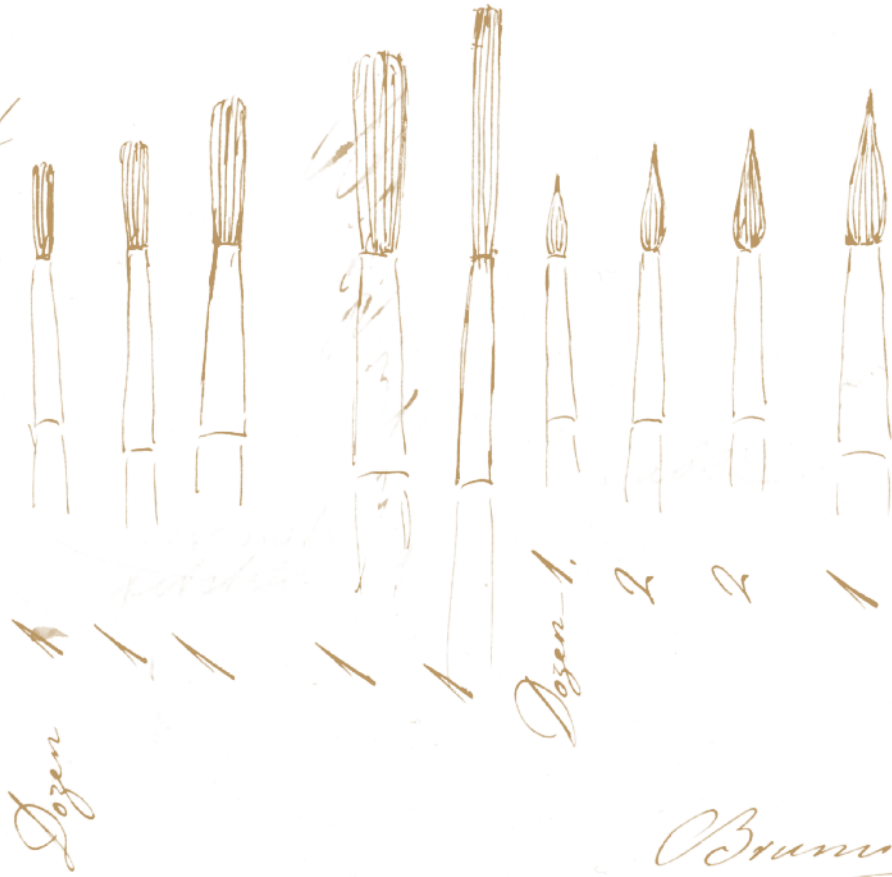
After Brumidi's death, his murals were altered by artists hired to repair and restore the paintings in the era before modern conservation. These alterations managed only to diminish Brumidi's originals, in many cases quite severely, and his reputation suffered accordingly. In recent decades, Brumidi's artistic contribution to

the Capitol has become a subject of serious study for scholars and a primary occupation for fine art conservators. Starting in the 1980s, Congress supported an extensive and long-term conservation program to restore Brumidi's work in the Capitol. As a result of a decade of researching Brumidi's life and of managing the mural conservation program, Architect of the Capitol Curator Barbara A. Wolanin published *Constantino Brumidi: Artist of the Capitol* in 1998. This book discusses Brumidi's background and painting techniques, as well as the political context in which the artist worked at the Capitol; the book also highlights the conservation and restoration efforts that had been accomplished by the mid-1990s.

Since then, the mural conservation program has made sweeping changes to the appearance of the Senate wing of the Capitol and has allowed a fresh examination of Brumidi's artwork. These changes are most evident in the Brumidi Corridors, where the reemergence of the historical detail in Brumidi's original murals has opened doors for new research, discoveries, and interpretations. What we know about the artist has been enhanced by the addition of several of Brumidi's preliminary sketches to the Senate collection and by the transcription of a key journal detailing the building of the Capitol extension, as well as by recently digitized resources that point to the inspiration for Brumidi's work. *To Make Beautiful the Capitol: Rediscovering the Art of Constantino Brumidi* offers the perspectives of curators, historians, and fine art conservators stirred by Brumidi's newly revealed artistry. The conservation and study of the historic spaces that Brumidi decorated in the U.S. Capitol is complex, intriguing—and continuing.

Amy Elizabeth Burton
Office of Senate Curator

Brush



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