



U.S. Senate Collection

The Battle of Lexington (detail),
oil on canvas sketch, ca. 1857.

Brumidi's artistic talent and
strong compositions are
beautifully expressed in his
small preparatory sketches.



A Collection of Brumidi Sketches

ARTISTIC PROCESS AND PATRIOTIC ENDEAVOR

Diane K. Skvarla

Five important oil sketches by Constantino Brumidi recently made their way back to the United States Capitol after more than a century's absence. Painted in the 1850s, the sketches reflect the foresight and efforts of several key figures: Montgomery C. Meigs, the supervising engineer of the Capitol extension who envisioned a building filled with art inspired by nationalist themes; Brumidi, the artist who applied his significant talents to ornamenting the Capitol with murals and to carrying out Meigs' vision; and the Macomb family, the civic-minded stewards who kept this distinctive collection of sketches intact for over 100 years. Brumidi painted the scenes in preparation for some of his most impressive frescoes in the Capitol, and a comparison of these small-scale works with the large-scale frescoes provides an intimate and insightful look at Brumidi's creative process and classical training.



Between 1855 and 1859, during his early years at the Capitol, Brumidi executed the five small oil on canvas sketches now owned by the Senate and House of Representatives. The collection included one sketch that Brumidi painted in preparation for his first fresco in the Capitol for the House Agriculture Committee Room, three for the Senate Committee on Military Affairs and Militia Room, and one for the Senate Reception Room. These sketches resulted from the collaboration between Brumidi and Meigs, and the success of this partnership, along with Meigs' oversight of the process, ultimately enabled the Macomb family to acquire the collection in the late 19th century.

Montgomery Meigs was a captain in the Army Corps of Engineers when Secretary of War Jefferson Davis appointed him in 1853 to the post of supervising engineer of the Capitol extension. Meigs was responsible for constructing the Capitol's additions and for negotiating contracts and hiring workers.

Meigs' role was to build spacious new quarters for the Senate and House of Representatives, and ultimately, to construct a massive cast-iron dome for the Capitol, but he involved himself in embellishing the building as well. An astute administrator and civil engineer, Meigs also took great pride and pleasure in the arts. He frequented galleries, met and corresponded with artists, and read about the art and architecture of the

Between 1855 and 1859, during his early years at the Capitol, Brumidi executed the five small oil on canvas sketches now owned by the Senate and House of Representatives.

world. This lifelong interest, as well as his desire to commemorate America through the arts and make the Capitol a great national monument, influenced Meigs' ambitious plans for the building.¹



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"Birdseye View of the City of Washington, with the Capitol in the Foreground," *The Illustrated London News*, engraving, May 25, 1861.

Brumidi's arrival at the Capitol coincided with the expansion of the building.

Meigs intended that the art of the Capitol inspire patriotic pride. He commissioned murals, paintings, and sculpture to illustrate the nation's history, values, and achievements. Meigs explained his vision for the Capitol's public art: "Although an engineer and 'nothing more' I have some feeling for art, some little acquaintance with its principles and its precepts and a very strong desire to use the opportunities & the influence which my position, as directing head of this great work, gives me for the advancement of art in this country."² Brumidi echoed Meigs' convictions. The artist reportedly proclaimed: "My one ambition and my daily prayer is that I may live long enough to make beautiful the Capitol of the one country on earth in which there is liberty."³ Brumidi's patriotic sentiment and artistic skill, combined with Meigs' emphasis on America's history and symbolism, created the distinctive art seen in the Capitol today.

On December 28, 1854, Constantino Brumidi came to the Capitol seeking employment and was

introduced to Montgomery Meigs. Impressed by the artist's credentials, Meigs gave Brumidi the opportunity to demonstrate his talent for painting fresco. Meigs assigned Brumidi the room intended for the House Agricultural Committee and, for the fresco, chose the theme of the Roman leader Cincinnatus called from the plow to serve his country.⁴ Brumidi was familiar with the story, having previously painted a lunette of the subject in Rome.⁵ Brumidi created a small oil on canvas sketch of the scene for Meigs' approval. The preparatory study pleased Meigs, who praised Brumidi's skill in drawing, composition, and coloring.⁶ The success of the sketch and the resulting fresco, *Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow*, marked the beginning of Brumidi's 25-year career at the United States Capitol.

After completion of the Cincinnatus fresco in 1855, Meigs directed Brumidi to create several small oil sketches in preparation for the frescoes in the Senate Committee on Military Affairs and Militia Room.⁷



Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Sketch for *Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow*, oil on canvas, 1855.

Brumidi prepared this oil on canvas sketch for his first Capitol fresco. The lower scene, depicting an allegorical image of Agriculture with Native American figures, was never executed in fresco.

As Meigs contemplated the decorative scheme for this room in 1856, illustrator Felix Darley advised: “The best subjects for the room of the committee on ‘military affairs’ would be scenes from the Revolution when Washington or his principal generals could be introduced, such as the Storming of Stony Point, the Battle of Trenton &c.”⁸ Brumidi originally painted three preparatory sketches for the room’s five lunettes, with each of the sketches illustrating two different battle scenes. Two of the scenes, from two of the sketches, were almost immediately translated into fresco: *Death*

of General Wooster, 1777 and *The Battle of Lexington*. These are some of Brumidi’s strongest images of American history.⁹ The pictures poignantly illustrate the turmoil and conflict of the Revolutionary War. Brumidi designed the scenes to fit the lunettes’ proportions, and the completed frescoes are the focal points of the room.

In keeping with the traditional practices of his classical training, Brumidi frequently prepared oil sketches before he began work on his murals at the Capitol. In fresco painting, it is necessary to develop



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General Mercer's Death by Bayonet Stroke and Storming of Stony Point, General Wayne Wounded in the Head, Carried into the Fort, oil on canvas sketch, ca. 1857.

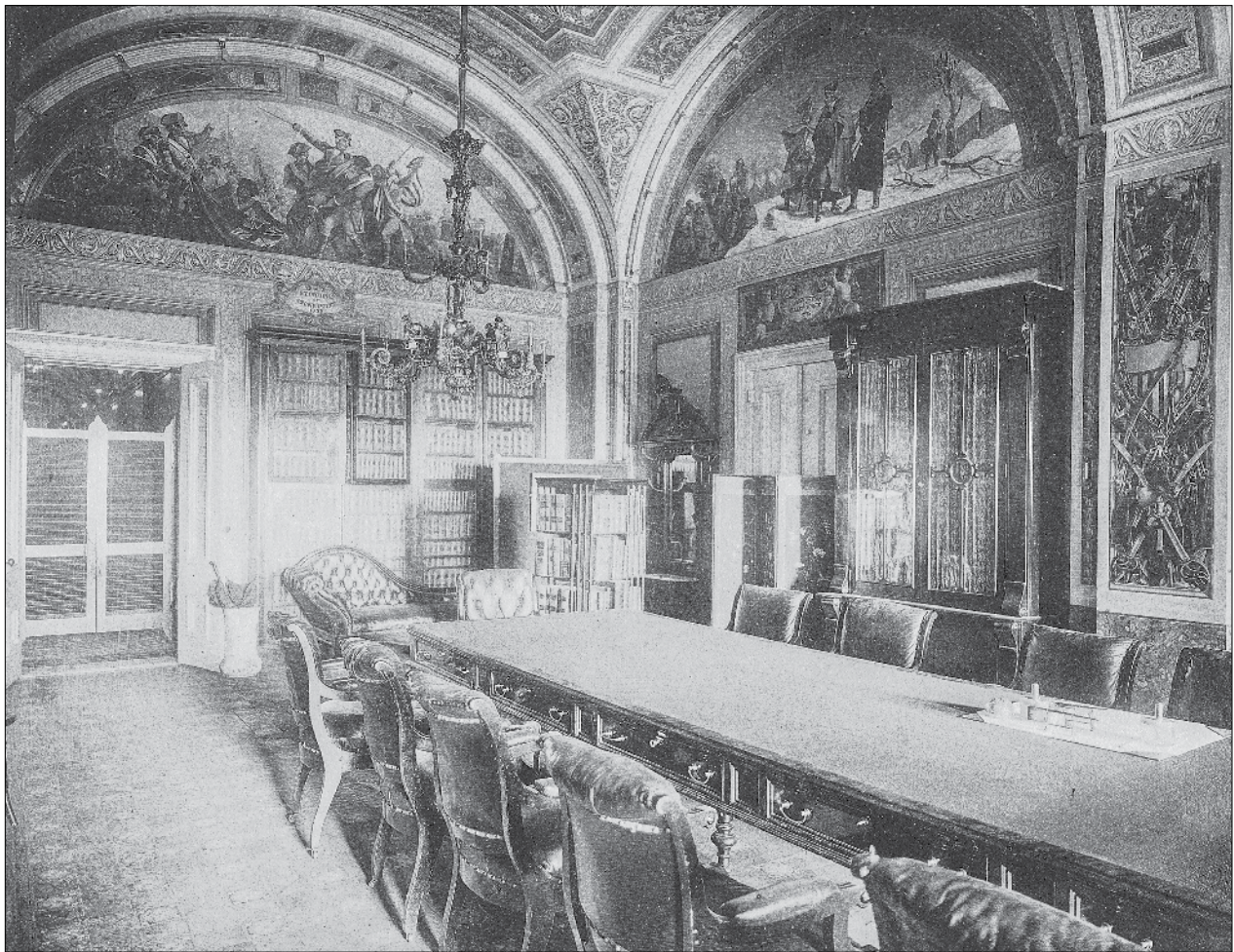
In preparation for his frescoes in the Senate Military Affairs and Militia Committee Room, Brumidi painted three oil sketches, each depicting two scenes. Only the lower image of this sketch was rendered in fresco.



the composition beforehand, as the medium does not easily permit experimentation or reworking. Often, Brumidi's first step was to analyze the room's architectural space and make a pencil drawing that showed the planned frescoes in relation to the overall decorative scheme of the room. He then prepared small-scale color sketches of each scene in oil or watercolor, which he submitted for approval. Next, Brumidi enlarged the preparatory sketch on paper to the exact scale of the proposed fresco and placed the resulting paper cartoon on the wall over the area to be painted. He transferred the outlines of the image to the wet

mortar through a variety of techniques and used the preparatory sketch as reference when painting the actual fresco.¹⁰ While the sketches were only the prelude to the frescoes, Brumidi included in the sketches all of the essential elements for the final murals and created well-constructed compositions and beautifully rendered scenes.

With minor exceptions, the frescoes are faithful to Brumidi's preparatory oil sketches. The differences between the two reflect the nature of the two mediums, the contrast in scale, and the function that each work served.



Architect of the Capitol

Senate Military Affairs and Militia Committee Room, ca. 1895.

Brumidi's frescoes encircling the room (now part of the Senate Appropriations Committee suite) reflect the original occupant and pay tribute to American military history.



Architect of the Capitol

Death of General Wooster, 1777, fresco, 1858.



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General Wooster at Ridgefield Mortally Wounded, Is Carried out of the Field and The Americans at Sagg [sic] Harbor Burned Twelve Brigs and Sloops, and [illegible] Bringing with Him Many Prisoners, oil on canvas sketch, ca. 1857.

Oil painting as a medium allows spontaneity and elaboration, as the artist can rework the paint and can change or add details. The ability to use dynamic brushwork and an underlying dark ground lends a sense of action and drama to Brumidi's oil sketches. In contrast, the brushwork in Brumidi's frescoes is more studied and precise, as reworking the wet mortar of fresco muddies the surface and causes the image to lose clarity. Since the fresco medium has a limited color palette, as only certain pigments can withstand the alkalinity of the mortar, this further creates a dissimilar appearance between Brumidi's preliminary studies and finished frescoes. The range in scale of Brumidi's oil sketches and frescoes introduces yet another variable in the visual impact of the two media. The sketches were intended to be seen at a close range and allowed Brumidi to conceptualize the subject matter, overall composition, relationship of the figures to each other and to the background, use of light and shade, and coloring. Finally, in evaluating the oil sketches and frescoes, it is important to remember that the sketches were only preparatory paintings created quickly; they were never intended to be viewed as finished works of art, as were the frescoes.

These many contrasts between oil and fresco are evident in Brumidi's battle scenes for the lunettes in the Military Affairs Committee room. The oil sketches successfully convey the spontaneity of the conflict. We see and feel the action: smoke from the battle scene curling into the sky, blood spilling onto the ground, and the anguish of war etched into every soldier's face. The viewer's eyes are drawn to the central image, which is more detailed and complete than the figures at the edges of the composition. In contrast, in Brumidi's frescoes, all of the figures are consistently presented with the same level of detail in a more documentary manner. The sketches present a scene unfolding before the viewer, while the frescoes present a commemoration of an event.

In the oil sketch, *General Wooster at Ridgefield*, the garments of the dying general are rendered with gradations of strong colors that leap from the surface and create dramatic contrast and movement. In the fresco, the colors are softer and not as intense, making the fabric appear less dynamic. Such differences are also seen in *The Battle of Lexington*. The fresco presents a posed and controlled image of a British officer firing on the Minutemen from his rearing horse; the white steed looks statuesque. In contrast, in the sketch, the horse conveys utter terror, showing the white of his eye and what appears to be frothy blood in his mouth. With a few brushstrokes in oil, Brumidi conveys action, feeling, and movement. This intimate connection to the artist's creative process is the extra dimension the oil sketches provide.

Although Brumidi completed a total of six scenes for the Military Affairs Committee, he was unable to translate all of the preparatory images into frescoes, since Chairman Jefferson Davis of Mississippi wished to use the room. More than 10 years had elapsed when, in 1871, Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, chairman of the committee during the Civil War, requested that the now-elderly Brumidi complete his work in the room. Brumidi proceeded to translate into fresco a scene from one of his earlier sketches, *Storming of Stony Point, General Wayne Wounded in the Head, Carried into the Fort*. The resulting fresco shows General "Mad Anthony" Wayne and his troops, victorious after a daring raid on the British garrison. Brumidi followed his preparatory study with very few compositional changes to the final fresco. He also created two new frescoes for the committee room, unrelated to the earlier preliminary sketches: *Washington at Valley Forge, 1778* and *The Boston Massacre, 1770*. Two of the six scenes from Brumidi's oil sketches were never completed for the room: *General Mercer's Death by Bayonet Stroke* and *The Americans at Sagg [sic] Harbor*



U.S. Senate Collection

General Wooster at Ridgefield Mortally Wounded, Is Carried out of the Field (detail), oil on canvas sketch, ca. 1857.

The oil sketch shows fluid handling of the paint and lack of finish in the forms, qualities that lend a sense of immediacy to the scene. Oil sketches of this kind served the artist in developing the design and allowed examination and approval before the actual work on the fresco proceeded.



Architect of the Capitol

Death of General Wooster, 1777 (detail), fresco, 1858.

Having conceptualized the overall composition in his preparatory sketch, Brumidi was able to refine the level of finish in the individual figures in his fresco. He included even the smallest element, such as the silhouetted figures emerging from the battle smoke, seen in the lower right corner.



U.S. Senate Collection

Death of General Montgomery and The Battle of Lexington, oil on canvas sketch, ca. 1857.



Architect of the Capitol

The Battle of Lexington, fresco, 1858.



U.S. Senate Collection

The Americans at Sag Harbor Burned Twelve Brigs and Sloops, and [illegible] Bringing with Him Many Prisoners (detail), oil on canvas sketch, ca. 1857.

The oil medium allowed Brumidi to utilize contrasting colors to highlight key details. In his sketch of the Battle of Sag Harbor, he draws attention to the distant conflagration of the British ships, far right, not only by turning the figures towards the action, but also by boldly accenting the colonel's cloak, the American flag, and the torch flame held aloft.

Burned Twelve Brigs and Sloops, and [illegible] Bringing with Him Many Prisoners. A detail from the third sketch, *Death of General Montgomery*, was painted on the ceiling to resemble a carved stone relief. When completed, the room for the Senate Committee on Military Affairs and Militia was one of the most nationalist in theme in the Capitol. In a eulogy to Brumidi in 1880, Senator Daniel Voorhees of Indiana lavished praise on the artwork, asking: “Who ever passed through the room of the Committee on Military Affairs without feeling that the very genius of heroism had left there its immortal inspirations?”¹¹

The final sketch by Brumidi in this collection served as a preparatory study for the Senate Reception Room, originally called “the antechamber of the Senate.” The sketch depicts four allegorical figures: Liberty, Peace, Plenty, and War. Brumidi began his designs for the elaborate room even before completing his work in the House Committee on Agriculture. Meigs wrote in December 1855: “Brumidi brought me a design sketch in pencil for the decoration of the Senate anteroom. It is beautiful. He is full of innovation, and this, if worked up with skill, will make a beautiful room.”¹²





Although Brumidi submitted his initial pencil sketch and a detailed design plan for the Senate Reception Room by early 1856, work on the room occurred sporadically over many years, with Brumidi modifying his designs for its murals in the process.¹³ Around 1858, Brumidi prepared an oil sketch, *Liberty, Peace, Plenty, War*, for the room, but he did not paint the fresco on the Reception Room's vaulted ceiling until 1869. The sketch shows Brumidi's virtuosity at perspective and foreshortening. With just a few well-placed brush strokes, Brumidi creates the illusion of cherubs soaring through the air as they are engaged in their various activities. The most significant change from sketch to fresco is evidenced in the figure of Peace. In the oil sketch, Brumidi identifies Peace with

her attribute of a rainbow and an olive wreath. Peace reaches to set fire to a pile of weapons. In the fresco, however, Brumidi depicts a serene figure bearing an olive branch in one hand, and in the other, the tools of the arts: paintbrushes and an architect's triangle and compass. A nearby cherub offers a lyre and trumpet to Peace, while another cherub dramatically discards the symbols of war: a shield, helmet, and sword.

The five oil sketches once owned by the Macomb family are just a few of the more than 30 known preparatory sketches in oil, watercolor, or pencil that Brumidi executed for his Capitol murals.¹⁴ They comprised the largest, still-intact private collection of Brumidi's preparatory studies for the building; the collection was a significant one, preserved for generations. The relationship between



U.S. Senate Collection

Liberty, Peace, Plenty, War, oil on canvas sketch, ca. 1858.

Brumidi's sketch celebrates the nation's history, achievements, and symbols with depictions of eagles, a cornucopia, a plow, and a locomotive.

Opposite: Senate Reception Room.

This highly decorated room continues to serve its original purpose as a meeting place for senators and constituents.



U.S. Senate Collection



Architect of the Capitol

Top: Peace, detail from *Liberty, Peace, Plenty, War*, oil on canvas sketch, ca. 1858.

Bottom: Peace, detail from *Liberty, Peace, Plenty, War*, fresco, 1869.

Brumidi dramatically altered the figure of Peace from his preparatory oil sketch to the fresco on the Senate Reception Room ceiling. In the interim, more than ten years had elapsed, and the Civil War had been fought.

Meigs and the Macomb family unquestionably played a role in the latter's acquisition of these historic sketches.

Meigs' work at the Capitol and his personal life were closely intertwined. In 1841, Meigs married Louisa Rodgers, the daughter of Minerva Denison Rodgers and Commodore John Rodgers, a venerated naval hero of the Barbary War; nine years later, Louisa's sister, Ann "Nannie" Rodgers, married John Navarre Macomb, Jr. The families quickly became attached, as evidenced by John and Nannie's naming their first child Montgomery Meigs Macomb. John served with the Army Department of Topographical Engineers and spent considerable time away from his family on various expeditions. During his absence, Nannie and the children lived with the Meigs family

Although the sketches may not have been considered fine art at the time, evidently both Brumidi and Meigs considered them worth saving.

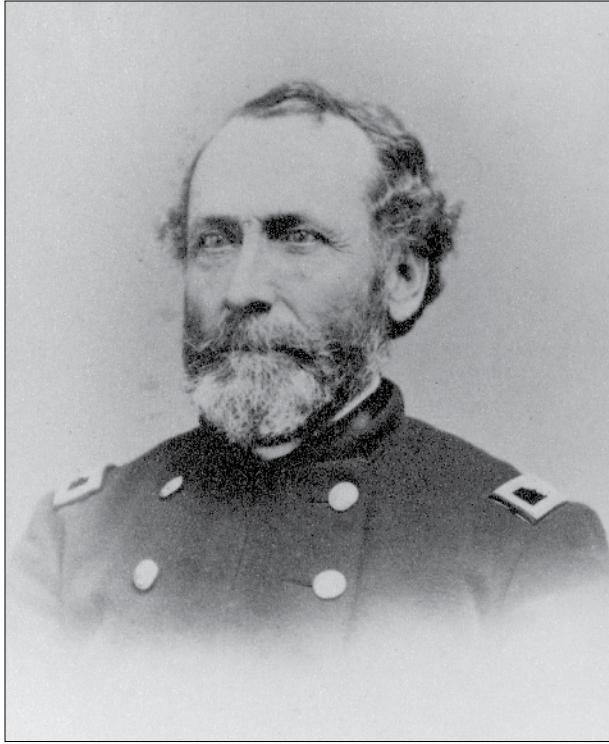
in Washington, D.C., and Nannie wrote frequently to her husband about family matters, the Washington social scene, and Meigs' work at the Capitol.

Montgomery Meigs and John Macomb shared a close friendship and career interests. Both were engineers and army men. During Macomb's visits home, the gentlemen took long walks into the neighboring countryside, attended receptions with their wives, and reviewed the work at the Capitol. Macomb consoled Meigs when Meigs buried a stillborn daughter. When Meigs was called away to serve as quartermaster general during the early years of the Civil War, he placed Macomb in charge of the construction of the Capitol extension. Although the Meigs and Macomb families moved to different parts of the country after the war, the two men continued to correspond until Macomb passed away in 1889.

While records indicate that Brumidi saved most of his preparatory oil sketches, leaving them on his death to his son Laurence, apparently Meigs also retained some of the artist's sketches.¹⁵ Although the sketches may not have been considered fine art at the time, evidently both Brumidi and Meigs considered them worth saving. After Meigs died in 1892, his Brumidi sketches came into the Macomb family's possession.

It is unknown exactly how the Macomb family acquired the five Brumidi sketches. In 1950, Myrtle Cheney Murdock, the wife of Congressman John Murdock of Arizona, wrote the first monograph on Brumidi: *Constantino Brumidi: Michelangelo of the Capitol*. She recorded that, after the death of Montgomery Meigs, some of Brumidi's "originals" were given to John Macomb's youngest son, Colonel Augustus Canfield Macomb (Meigs' nephew), although her source for this information was not provided and cannot be verified.¹⁶ The Macomb family offered two alternatives regarding the provenance of the sketches. One possibility is that Colonel Augustus Macomb purchased the sketches from the estate sale of Montgomery Meigs in 1892. However, records from the estate sale do not list any Brumidi paintings. The second possibility is that Montgomery Meigs originally presented the sketches to Montgomery Meigs Macomb, since the young man had served as Meigs' aide-de-camp during the Civil War.

Despite ambiguity about how the Macomb family acquired the Brumidi oil sketches, the family, with its history of military service to the nation, highly esteemed its collection of Brumidi's works. Colonel Augustus Macomb "traveled from one army post to another over a quarter of a century . . . and always the beautiful Brumidi paintings went along."¹⁷ According to the recollections of his son, Captain Alexander Macomb, the sketches hung in an adobe house at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, now known as Crook House. Colonel Augustus Macomb



Special Collections & Archives Division USMA Library

John Navarre Macomb, Jr. (1811-1889).



Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Augustus Canfield Macomb (1854-1932), son of John N. Macomb, Jr.

lived there from July 1900 to March 1901, when he commanded Troop A, 5th Cavalry Regiment. Augustus Macomb later left the sketches to Alexander.

As the sketches descended through the Macomb family, a greater national appreciation for Constantino Brumidi and his work emerged, as research and restoration brought forward new information on the artist. The start of a comprehensive mural conservation program in 1981 under the Architect of the Capitol focused renewed attention on Brumidi's artistic contributions. As a result, the Macomb descendants recognized the significance of these early Brumidi sketches to the history of the Capitol and relinquished the care of this century-old collection to Congress with the sentiment, "The Brumidi sketches are now back where they belong."¹⁸

The sketches are a small and intimate chapter in the larger story of how the U.S. Capitol has come to be the magnificent and inspiring building it is today. It is the seat of government, a symbol of democracy, and a patriotic shrine for the nation. For over 200 years, countless figures, both public and private, have worked together to make the building and its art as stirring as the ideals they stand for. Brumidi's five oil sketches are now part of the Senate and House of Representatives collections, thanks to a collective patriotic endeavor: an army engineer who loved art as well as his country, an Italian-born artist who was inspired by the history of his adopted homeland, and a family steeped in military tradition who appreciated the historic significance of this artwork.



U.S. Senate Collection

Constantino Brumidi's plantation desk, early 19th century.

Brumidi's desk is inscribed on the back "Brooklyn NY" and suggests a connection to the city where he first arrived and lived in this country.

Brumidi's Plantation Desk

On February 19, 1880, Constantino Brumidi died from kidney failure at his Washington, D.C., home. The funeral, held the next day at his three-story brick house, was attended by George F.W. Strieby, one of Brumidi's assistants and the person to whom Brumidi entrusted his mahogany plantation desk.

The drop-front mahogany desk was likely used at Brumidi's home studio, "a pleasant room given up to casts, pictures and music."¹⁹ The studio is where Brumidi completed preliminary sketches for his murals, "so that all the work done at the Capitol [was] simply the mechanical execution."²⁰ A wall of the parlor studio was devoted to "half-finished designs"²¹ and had a space the exact width of the Rotunda frieze marked off.²² Confined at home because of ill health in the final days of his life, Brumidi was working on the "Battle of Lexington" cartoon for the Rotunda frieze.

The recipient of Brumidi's mahogany desk, George Strieby, was born in Bavaria and immigrated to the United States in 1853. He lived in Washington, D.C., with Emmerich A. Carstens, foreman of the decorative painters for the Capitol extension. Strieby served as an apprentice and then decorative painter at the Capitol for five years and worked closely with Brumidi from 1877 to 1879. When Strieby died in 1908, the desk descended to his son, Philip, also a decorative painter, and then to his granddaughter, Anna Strieby Fogle, who donated the desk to the Senate in 1971.