



Architect of the Capitol



Conserved maiden panel (detail), Senate Appropriations Committee Room.

Conservation restored the graceful, floating quality of the nine maidens featured on the room's wall panels.



# *Continuing Conservation of Brumidi's Murals in the U.S. Capitol*

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**F**reed from dark and clumsy overpaint, many of Constantino Brumidi's original murals can now be seen and understood in ways that have not been possible for more than a century. Restoration began in the early 1980s, when the Architect of the Capitol launched a long-term mural conservation program sparked by the burgeoning fields of historic preservation and professional fine art conservation.<sup>1</sup> The accomplishments of the first decade of the conservation program are highlighted in the 1998 publication *Constantino Brumidi: Artist of the Capitol*.<sup>2</sup> Since then, numerous conservation studies and treatments have revealed more about the beauty and sophistication of the Capitol's 19th-century murals.



Trained in Rome, Brumidi arrived in America a master in painting life-like classical figures and forms that appear to be three dimensional, or trompe l'oeil. He was a brilliant colorist, skilled in a variety of paint mediums, including true fresco. Brumidi carried out the vision of Montgomery C. Meigs, supervising engineer of the Capitol extension, for a Capitol with walls and ceilings filled with murals in the Renaissance tradition. Within two decades of Brumidi's death, however, inferior artists and decorative painters began to touch up and completely repaint his murals with oil-based paint, unfortunately matching their colors to grime, previous overpaint, or yellowed varnish.

### *Brumidi's First Room, H-144*

Brumidi created his first Capitol mural in the new House wing, in the room designated for the House Agriculture Committee. He successfully demonstrated his skill in painting in true fresco, which must be painted on sections of fresh plaster applied each day and which allows the pigments to become part of the wall as the plaster cures. According to Meigs, this was the first time fresco had been used in this country. Meigs brought many prominent figures to view Brumidi's work in progress, including President Franklin Pierce, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, and art collector William Corcoran. Meigs put Brumidi on the payroll and directed him to fill the room with murals, and the artist finished the room's lunettes, walls, and ceiling in 1856. Brumidi's convincing trompe l'oeil effects made the room a popular attraction for visitors.<sup>3</sup>

A small fire in the committee room in 1920, as well as soot from years of fireplace use, led to more than one repainting of the room's lunettes and wall murals in darker colors. When the figurative murals on the ceiling and lunettes were conserved in 1987 and 1988, testing showed that the walls below the lunettes had

been originally painted in true fresco to look like stone with arched moldings. This illusionistic effect was obscured by the overpaint, and in 2005, the walls were fully restored. After removing multiple layers of oil paint, conservators reduced the unsightly appearance of soot-filled cracks on the original fresco and skillfully inpainted damaged areas to match the original color and surface appearance.<sup>4</sup> Now, 150 years after Brumidi painted his first room in the Capitol, one can appreciate his sophisticated murals, which create a Renaissance-inspired illusion of a room constructed



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House Agriculture Committee Room after conservation of the murals on the ceiling, lunettes, and walls.

The walls, the only ones in the Capitol that Brumidi painted in true fresco, show his skill in executing trompe l'oeil moldings that resemble carved stone arches.

of stone with vaults open to a blue sky in which deities representing the four seasons float on clouds.

*The Senate Appropriations Committee Room, S-127*

As Brumidi was completing his first room, Meigs had the artist turn his attention to designs for the new Senate wing, which was still under construction. The room planned for the Naval Affairs Committee was decorated by Brumidi with images related to the sea and sailing. The room was later assigned to the Senate Committee on Appropriations, which continues to

occupy this beautifully decorated space. The murals were inspired by first-century Roman wall paintings from “the precious monuments of Pompeii and the baths of Titus.”<sup>5</sup> Brumidi’s watercolor design for the committee room offered two different color schemes. The option with the blue background found in some Roman murals, more suitable for naval and marine themes, was selected rather than the more typical “Pompeian red” background. Images of classical gods and goddesses, such as Neptune and Venus, as well as sea creatures, are interspersed throughout the ceiling,



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Design for the Naval Affairs Committee Room, watercolor, 1856.

This watercolor sketch, approved and signed by Meigs on August 20, 1856, shows the Pompeian-style designs proposed by Brumidi for the room’s ceiling and wall murals.

On the brilliant blue panels on the lower walls, Brumidi painted maidens who hold objects related to the sea and sailing and seem to float gracefully in the air. The panels are framed by trompe l'oeil pilasters and ledges supporting cornucopias of flowers. Above the doors, he placed pairs of genii (winged cherubs with acanthus leaves forming the lower halves of their bodies) holding the striped shield of the United States, set against striking black backgrounds.<sup>6</sup>

Over the years, soot and grime from the fireplace, open windows, and tobacco smoke, as well as yellowed varnish, discolored the blue fields, or backgrounds, so much that they were repainted a heavy dark green, imprisoning

the maidens so that they no longer seemed to float. In 1978, shortly before the Architect of the Capitol mural conservation program began, in-house decorative painters “restored” the room by reworking damaged areas, repainting the panels in an even darker green, and brushing a yellowing varnish over all of the walls. Fortunately, on the ceiling, the plain fields were repainted in colors very close to the original, and Brumidi’s true fresco figures were left largely untouched.

Conservation in the Senate Appropriations Committee Room began in 2003 with scientific testing and analysis to understand the materials and the conditions of the murals.<sup>7</sup> Recovering the true color of the maiden panels



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Senate Appropriations Committee Room before and after conservation.

Before conservation, *left*, overpaint and yellowed varnish obscured details in the wall and lunette murals. The restored murals, *right*, can now be appreciated with their original brilliant colors and three-dimensional forms.



was a priority. Brumidi's 1856 watercolor sketch, early photographs, small exposure windows made by conservators, and a cleaned area on the panel behind the room's gilded mirror all verified the original color. In 2005, the panels were fully conserved, and layers of green overpaint were removed to reveal Brumidi's vibrant blue. Cleaned of yellowed varnish and overpaint, the trompe l'oeil frames surrounding the panels could once again be appreciated.



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**Testing of area behind mirror, Senate Appropriations Committee Room.**  
Conservators first revealed the original blue field in this area located behind the room's large gilded mirror.



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**Maiden panel (detail), Senate Appropriations Committee Room.**  
This photograph shows the striking contrast between the original brilliant blue of the backgrounds and the dark green overpaint.



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**Partially restored panel of genii with American shield, Senate Appropriations Committee Room.**  
The delicate, rich colors and three-dimensional quality of the genius on the left were revealed after the removal of yellowed varnish.



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Damaged maiden panel during and after conservation, Senate Appropriations Committee Room.

The most severely damaged of the maiden panels is shown with paint losses after the removal of heavy overpaint, *left*, and after the missing areas of the blue field were carefully recreated, *right*.



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Cornucopia with flowers before and after conservation, Senate Appropriations Committee Room.

The overpainted cornucopia, *left*, had been given a heavier arrangement of roses and leaves. The restored original mural, *right*, features morning glories and delicate tendrils.

The panels' graceful maidens in their iridescent dresses were brought back to life, and incredibly delicate details were recovered, such as the line on one maiden's fishing pole. Some of the cornucopias of dainty flowers on the illusionistic ledge had been significantly altered, changing the colors and the types of flowers. Other cornucopias were found to be badly damaged under the overpaint and had to be sensitively recreated based on those on other walls that had remained intact under the overpaint.

Conservation of the lunettes above the maiden panels was another challenge that ultimately helped confirm the written history about the painting of the committee room's lunettes. Camillo Bisco, an artist hired to help Brumidi, painted the committee room's lunettes with the Pompeian architectural perspectives suggested in

Brumidi's watercolor sketch. Each of the six architectural perspectives contains a central area that was intended to be filled with a naval battle scene. Bisco, however, was fired in early 1858, after completing only one lunette in its entirety. In 1978, the central areas were repainted with fields of a jarring, flat light gray.

Conservators consolidated detached paint in the lunettes so that they could safely clean the murals of grime and overpaint. They found that water leaks had destroyed much of Bisco's painting in his one completed lunette, leaving the design compromised and eliminating the option of replicating Bisco's scene in the other lunettes' central areas. Instead, the solution for the blank areas was to remove overpaint and recreate the shadowy neutral tone, leaving them as they looked in Brumidi's lifetime.



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**Left: Exposure windows in the northwest lunette, Senate Appropriations Committee Room.**

The overpainted lunette was tested to explore underlying layers of paint.

**Below: Conserved northwest lunette, Senate Appropriations Committee Room.**

Beneath overpaint in the northwest lunette, conservators found the central area's shadowy neutral color. This effect was replicated in the remaining lunettes.



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**Treating lifting tempera paint in the lunettes, Senate Appropriations Committee Room.**

Before cleaning and overpaint removal could begin, conservators consolidated lifting paint.



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**Evidence of mural painted by one of Brumidi's assistants, Senate Appropriations Committee Room.**

The artist's signature, "G. West," was found inscribed in the plaster with "Delt.," an abbreviation for "Delineator."

In addition, the lunettes were tested to determine if anything remained of six earlier paintings of War of 1812 naval battles. These battle scenes are documented in Meigs' journal and correspondence, although no photographs or sketches of the paintings are known. The scenes were painted in 1856 by George West, a young American painter whom Meigs had hired to work under Brumidi. Although West complained that he deserved higher pay, Meigs was not happy with his work. Since Meigs had refused West's angry offer to erase his scenes, the possibility remained that they might still be recoverable beneath the overpaint. However, testing found only small fragments of color, showing that West's paintings had indeed been

scraped off and are now lost to history. Conservators did discover that West had pressed so hard in signing his name that it remains inscribed in the plaster, tangible confirmation that he had worked in the room.

In 2010 and 2011, conservators removed discolored varnish and selective overpaint on the rest of the committee room's lower walls above the faux marbled dado and uncovered the brilliance of the colors. The conservators also restored the full three-dimensional effect that Brumidi had created in the figures and marbled pilasters.<sup>8</sup> Since the murals on the ceiling vaults remain close to their original appearance, they are a lower priority for conservation but will be addressed in the future.



U.S. Senate Collection

*Portrait of a Child with Moth*,  
oil on canvas, 1853.

Brumidi combined portraiture  
with allegory in this representation  
of Kate Bennitt.

### *Portrait of a Child with Moth*

In 1852, Constantino Brumidi immigrated to America and resided briefly in New York City. To establish himself as an artist during these initial years in America, he accepted commissions such as *Portrait of a Child with Moth*. An inscription on the reverse of this painting identifies the young sitter as Kate Bennitt.

Brumidi's portrait of Kate is similar in style to three allegorical scenes, *Hope*, *Plenty*, and *Progress*, that Brumidi executed for a ceiling in the Bennitt family's home in Southampton, Long Island. Two of the paintings depict female figures adorned with billowing drapery and set against a background of clouds. In *Child with Moth*, Brumidi places two-and-a-half-year-old Kate in a setting of heavenly clouds. She wears a pink silk drape rather than contemporary Victorian attire, and her hands delicately cradle a large moth.

In painting and literature, butterflies and moths traditionally represent transience. Victorians viewed childhood as an idealistic phase of life with a distinct identity of its own. The moth serves as an attribute of childhood, representing the delicate nature of youth and the fleeting passage of time. This sense of fragility and the impending darkness of the clouds in *Child with Moth* are all the more poignant with hindsight: Kate would not survive her eighth birthday. Child mortality rates were high in the 19th century, and parents often lost more than one offspring to childhood illnesses. Catherine Eulalie Bennitt (Kate), born on October 7, 1851, died October 5, 1859, just shy of her birthday. A brother died in infancy.



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*Washington with Jefferson and Hamilton*, painted by Brumidi in 1872, flanked by portraits of 20th-century senators, Senate Reception Room. Two blank rondels were filled in 2004 with portraits of Senators Arthur H. Vandenberg, left, and Robert F. Wagner, right.

### *The Senate Reception Room, S-213*

The Senate Reception Room, located near the Senate chamber, is one of the most highly ornamented rooms in the Capitol. Like many of the other spaces Brumidi decorated, the Reception Room has undergone extensive conservation in recent years. Restoring the complex decorative scheme has taken years of study and work by experienced conservators, as well as the ongoing support and commitment of the Architect of the Capitol, Senate leadership, and Congress.

Brumidi submitted a first sketch and written proposal for the allegorical subjects on the Senate Reception Room ceiling in 1855. During the next two decades, Brumidi added murals to the room, although he never completed all of the portraits that he planned for the impressive and richly decorated space. The room's intricate gilded cast plaster decorations, consisting of plant forms and classical motifs punctuated by eagles and stags, were created by head ornamental plasterer Ernest Thomas and gilded by François Hugot. The lower walls were finished with scagliola (imitation marble) in several colors. By 1858, Brumidi had painted the cherubs in the center of the ceiling's dome, and for the pendentives, completed allegorical figures of the four cardinal virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. Once construction of the Capitol extension was completed, murals could no

longer be paid for with construction funds, and Brumidi was removed from the payroll. Commissions for him to add murals were sporadic. Not until 1869 was he hired to paint the scenes of Liberty, Peace, Plenty, and War in the groin vaults on the north end of the Senate Reception Room. In 1870 and 1871, Brumidi designed and painted trompe l'oeil figures of maidens and cherubs to resemble marble sculpture in the lunettes. Finally, in 1872, he was paid to fill one of the blank areas on the south lunette with a scene of President Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton. His 1876 petition to fill the remaining spaces in the room with portraits of presidents was unsuccessful. A century after Brumidi had proposed portraits of "illustrious men" for the ovals on the walls, the Senate made the decision to fill the ovals with five portraits of notable senators. These portraits were painted on canvas and installed in 1959. Three of the rondels that Brumidi left blank were filled in 2004 and 2006 with portraits of 20th-century senators and a double portrait depicting the authors of the Connecticut Compromise.<sup>9</sup>

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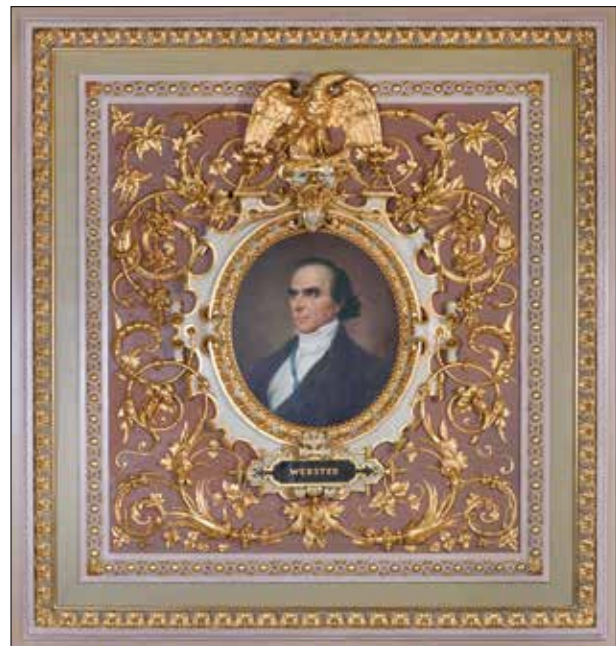
*Opposite: Pilot treatment on the west wall, Senate Reception Room.* The pilot area included one of every kind of panel: the portrait panel on the left; the central pilaster's putti panel, Greek key border, and flanking candelabra panels; and the disc panel on the right.



Brumidi's murals in the Senate Reception Room have been subject to damage from repairs following an explosion, discoloration from layers of grime and tobacco smoke, and extensive and misguided overpaint. A full repainting and clumsy overgilding were carried out throughout the room in 1930. Conservation of the Senate Reception Room began in the mid-1990s with Brumidi's figurative frescoes and murals.<sup>10</sup> Attention later turned to restoring the ornate gilded cast plaster and decorative painting that are such an important part of the aesthetic plan. Decisions about how to restore each of the dozens of painted or gilded decorative elements were guided by an intensive study, which included microscopic analysis of scores of tiny extracted samples and the creation of numerous exposures of the original color and finish by careful removal of later layers. The analysis verified that the original decorative paint finishes were composed of thin layers and glazes that softened and enriched the final appearance. The shiny, burnished water gilding—applied in 1857 to highlight features of the cast plaster leaves, flowers, ears of corn, sheaves of wheat, and classical

decoration—was discovered largely intact and recoverable under layers of dark brown overpaint and overgilding. However, the original matte oil gilding on most of the plaster moldings could not be separated from the oil overpaint, and these elements had to be skillfully regilded.

A pilot treatment of the Senate Reception Room's west wall included testing on the three types of wall panels that repeat throughout the room. Because of the complexity of the decoration, restoration was carried out by professional gilding and painting conservators working alongside skilled decorative painters, all interacting with the curators during the analysis and decision-making process. Dark brown overpaint was painstakingly removed from the borders of one of the pilot panels. Conservators identified the borders' original pinkish-tan color resembling sandstone, and these original surfaces exposed by conservators served as the model for the replication of other borders.<sup>11</sup> Exposures on the painted areas surrounding the shimmering gold botanical forms and classical moldings revealed delicate tones of warm light stone, coppery brown, and soft green. These colors were carefully replicated on other



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Webster portrait panel before and after conservation, Senate Reception Room.

Before restoration, layers of dark overpaint and inappropriate gilding gave the panel a drab appearance, *left*. Restoration of the original paint colors and brilliant gilding brought out the sophisticated, dynamic quality of the plaster ornamentation, *right*.



panels, as were the stone-like borders and the trompe l’oeil Greek key patterns simulating carved stone.

At the same time, conservators worked on sections of the room’s lunettes. They consolidated detached plaster, removed jarring overpaint, and softened the appearance of the blank areas that Brumidi had intended to fill with portraits of presidents.<sup>12</sup>

With the pilot treatment completed, the sophisticated palette and decorative scheme that Brumidi and his assistants created became evident. The sections restored in the pilot area not only illustrate how the original wall decorations complemented Brumidi’s figurative frescoes and murals, but also set the standard for the restoration of the decorative wall panels in the rest of the room.



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**Conservator regilding cast plaster ornaments, Senate Reception Room.**

This intricate work requires skill and patience, as well as a thorough understanding of the historic gilding patterns.



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**Pilot treatment of stone-colored borders, Senate Reception Room.**

The original Greek key pattern in light colors resembling stone was completely covered by dark brown overpaint. (The candelabra panel’s borders and cast-plaster gilded moldings are shown already restored.)



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**Replicating the Greek key design, Senate Reception Room.**

Conservation of the pilot panels helped determine the best methods for restoring the walls in the room. Here, the decorative painter replicates the trompe l’oeil Greek key design.



### *The Brumidi Corridors*

The restoration of the Brumidi Corridors has been the most large-scale mural conservation project in the Capitol, in terms of the extent of Brumidi's work that has been uncovered and the time that has been devoted to the restoration. The impressive vaulted Brumidi Corridors crisscross the first floor of the Senate wing, and the conservation project has brought about dramatic changes to the appearance of the murals designed, and in part painted, by Brumidi himself. The murals on the walls and pilasters are divided into panels framed by trompe l'oeil molding and filled with complex decorative motifs. No two panels are identical, making them worthy of fine art conservation rather than treatment as decorative painting with uniformly repeated patterns. For more than a century, Brumidi's murals, which were easily damaged because of their location in busy passageways, were retouched or repainted in ever-darkening colors by artists or decorative painters at a time when repainting was the commonly accepted way to restore them.

Over the years, discoveries resulting from research have added to the understanding of the corridors' designs and subjects. For example, one scholar was able to locate in the New York Public Library the oversized volumes with hand-colored plates of Raphael's loggia that had

inspired Meigs when he saw them at the Astor Library. Meigs noted in his journal, "They have 3 volumes—the pilasters, the arabesque[s], and the loggias. I have never seen colored engraving of these works before. They are very beautiful, rich and harmonious in color, simple and beautiful in design. I wish I could see the rooms themselves. This book will give us ideas in decorating our lobbies."<sup>13</sup> Also, studies of the birds, butterflies, and flowers in the conserved wall panels have increased appreciation of the way in which American flora and fauna are accurately documented in the Capitol's murals.<sup>14</sup> In addition, paint analysis and testing, as well as the opening of exposure windows throughout the corridors, have provided more understanding of the original appearance and materials of the 19th-century murals and wall decoration, such as the trompe l'oeil inlaid and carved stone designs discovered during recent testing, which will serve to guide future restoration.<sup>15</sup>

Conservation in the Brumidi Corridors started in 1985 with the lunettes over committee room doors. These historical scenes and portraits were painted by Brumidi himself in true fresco. Once the lunettes were conserved, attention turned to the wall murals below the cornice. Recovery of the elaborately decorated original panels hidden under muddy green and dirty



New York Public Library



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*Right:* Engraving by Giovanni Ottaviani of a panel from Raphael's loggia (detail), in *Loggie de' Raffaele nel Vaticano*, ca. 1772–77.

*Far right:* Panel with chipmunks (detail), Brumidi Corridors (North Corridor).

Hand-colored engravings from a book on Raphael's loggia, *right*, impressed Meigs and provided ideas for the designs in the Senate's corridors, *far right*.

yellow overpaint began in 1996. A successful pilot project was carried out in the Patent Corridor, where Brumidi painted portraits of inventors in the lunettes. It proved that Brumidi's original designs and colors in the panels and trompe l'oeil borders were in remarkably good condition under the layers of overpaint and could be recovered. Replication was necessary only for the plain stone-colored borders and was guided by exposure windows that revealed the original color. Surprisingly, as the work progressed over the next decade, subtle variations were discovered in the colors of the repeating elements, such as the stone-colored

borders, molded cornices, and star bands over doorways. These differences may have been intentional, to suggest different light sources, or could have resulted from the use of hand-mixed colors by different painters working under varied lighting conditions.

Following the conservation of the wall murals in the Patent Corridor, the restoration proceeded through the long North Corridor. This hallway is painted with elaborately decorated panels featuring pairs of birds, arrangements of fruits and flowers, and illusionistic relief profile portraits of Revolutionary-era leaders, as



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Panel with illusionistic relief portrait of Revolutionary War General Richard Montgomery, Brumidi Corridors (North Corridor).

A comparison of the panels before conservation, *left*, and after conservation, *right*, shows how the subtle colors, details, and three-dimensional effects were lost during repainting over the years.



well as panels depicting trophies of symbolic objects. Recovery of Brumidi's original designs continued down the West Corridor, with its illusionistic relief portraits of signers of the Declaration of Independence and diminutive classical gods and goddesses.<sup>16</sup>

As conservation of the walls progressed for more than a decade, it was discovered that the condition of the panels varied greatly. Plaster failing from loss of cohesion or detachment from the brick wall was found to some extent on most of the panels. The conservators gradually refined materials and techniques for strengthening the plaster. A system of hanging bottles and tubes resembling a medical IV drip allowed a consolidant fluid to flow gently and effectively into the voids and unstable areas. Once the plaster was treated,

conservators could painstakingly remove the layers of oil overpaint. Any lost details were carefully inpainted. Panel by panel, Brumidi's original designs in the vivid shades of red, white, and blue described in early guide books were brought back to view. Many surprising and beautiful details were recovered, such as a little ear of corn, the expressive face of a squirrel, or the graceful form of a classical deity. To illustrate how discolored the walls were prior to conservation, a section of an overpainted panel has been left in the east stairwell.

One of the greatest challenges for the conservators of the Brumidi Corridors was the North Entry. Although the North Entry's original tempera ceiling murals remained intact, early testing on the overpainted walls was inconclusive, and the original murals were not found



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**Left: Wall panel during conservation testing, Brumidi Corridors (West Corridor).**

The soft white fields and fresh colors of the original 1850s designs slowly came back into view as conservators removed overpaint and yellowed varnish.

**Below: Conservator at work, Brumidi Corridors.**

After removing layers of overpaint, the conservator carefully applies reversible materials to areas where the original paint is missing.



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at that time. Aided by years of experience in the rest of the corridors, conservators were finally able to uncover original designs buried under a heavy green paint. Two panels in the North Entry had been replastered long ago and did not contain any original design. They were replicated based on neighboring panels, and this replication helped restore the symmetry of the space.<sup>17</sup>

### *The Zodiac Corridor*

The north section of the West Corridor got its name from the signs of the zodiac on brilliant blue fields that Brumidi painted above the cornice on the highly decorated, barrel-vaulted ceiling. The wide panels on the walls are painted similarly to those in the adjoining corridors, which feature trophies of symbolic objects



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Ceiling before and after restoration, Brumidi Corridors (Zodiac Corridor).

Overpaint compromised the sophisticated design and dramatically altered the colors, *above left*. After conservation, *left*, the ceiling's murals once again resembled gathered fabric panels.



attributed to the English artist James Leslie and illusionistic relief portraits painted by Brumidi. Like the rest of the Brumidi Corridors, the original murals on the walls and ceiling of the Zodiac Corridor were hidden under layers of overpaint. The ceiling, originally painted in tempera, had also been periodically damaged by water leaks from pipes above, necessitating repairs and repainting numerous times. In the early 1980s, the signs of the zodiac were repainted with different and larger designs.



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**Conservation of Pisces, Brumidi Corridors (Zodiac Corridor).**

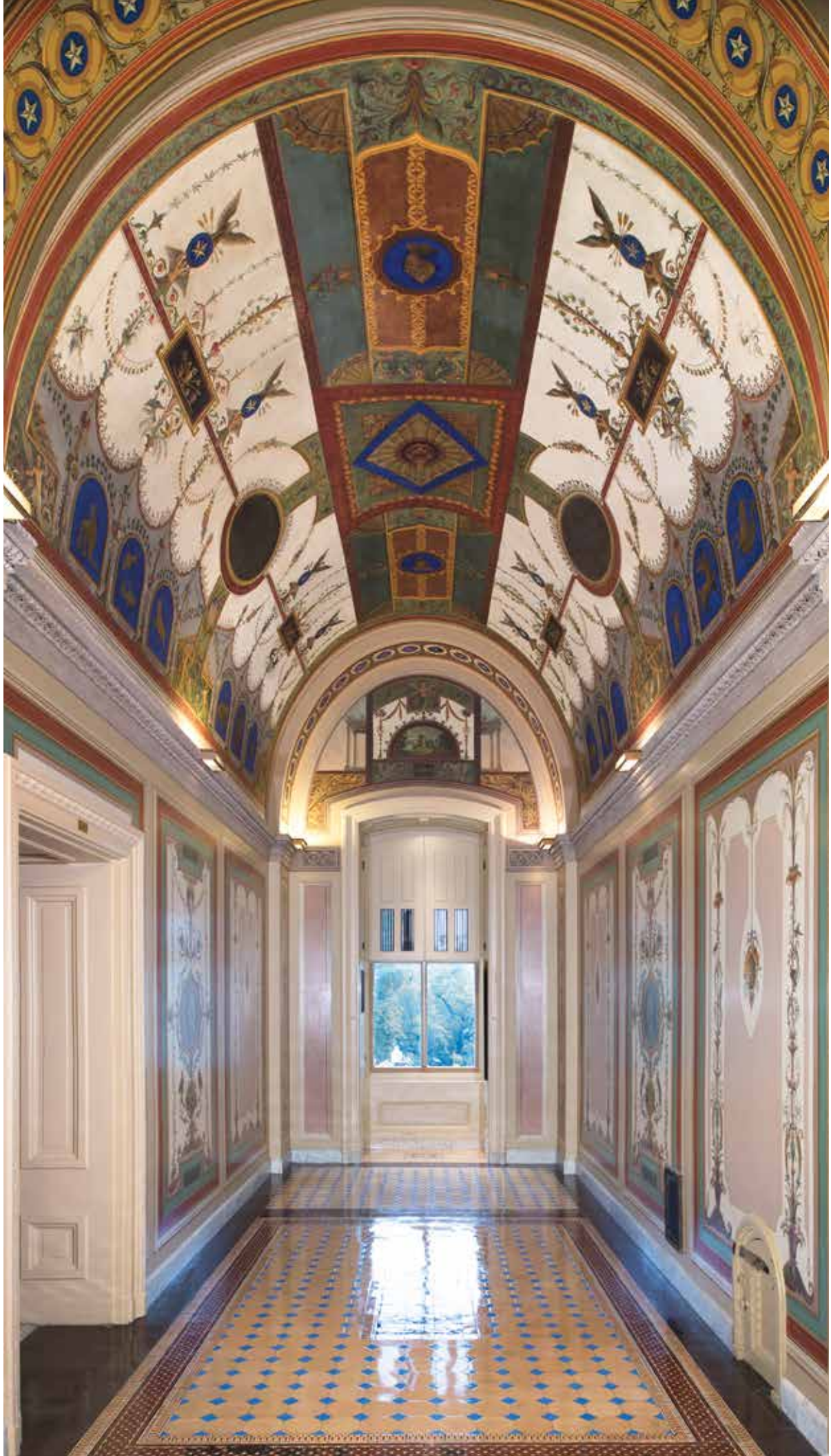
The large overpainted zodiac sign concealed Brumidi's original, smaller sign. The bottom fish, partially conserved, shows the size difference between the original and the overpainted fish.



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Panel with trophies and flowers during and after the conservation process, Brumidi Corridors (Zodiac Corridor).

As conservation progressed, *left*, the refinement of the original wall murals became apparent, *right*.



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Conservation of the area began in 2012. Unstable plaster and paint were consolidated, and to the extent possible, overpaint was removed from the ceiling. This work revealed the colors and designs of the tempera ceiling, transforming the fields from dirty yellow to creamy white and bringing back the jewel-like tones of the original. Where Brumidi's designs had been washed away by water leaks, they were reconstructed from similar images on the opposite side of the ceiling vault. Where heavy applications of oil overpaint could not be removed, the correct colors were replicated based on the original colors identified by the conservators.

Cleaning the wall panels revealed the delicate details of the trophies and flowers. The panel with a portrait of Robert Morris (a financier of the American Revolution) was discovered to be a reproduction on new plaster that closely followed the design on the opposite wall. Since the original panel no longer existed, the reproduction panel was toned to better harmonize with the colors and style of the adjacent original panels. At the end of the project, a wall that for 10 years had separated the Zodiac Corridor from the West Corridor was removed.<sup>18</sup> Its removal reestablished the Zodiac Corridor as part of the Brumidi Corridors, returning the hallways to their original 19th century plan.<sup>19</sup>



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Ceiling mural before and during conservation, Brumidi Corridors (Zodiac Corridor).

The fragile nature of tempera paint made the ceiling susceptible to water leaks that started to wash away the paint layer, *above left*. The same detail is shown during conservation, *left*.



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### *The Trophy Room*

With the goal of full restoration of the Brumidi Corridors, conservation priority shifted in 2011 to the area called the Trophy Room, which takes its name from the lunette murals that depict trophies of weapons and armor. Despite past treatment, lifting and flaking paint endangered the original ceiling mural. The first conservation challenge was to find materials that would readhere the lifting paint without darkening the colors. As with the other ceilings in the Brumidi Corridors, the Trophy Room's original illusionistic carved stone designs were painted in the water-based tempera medium. The ceiling vaults were found to have been crudely touched up in tempera at least two times; unfortunately, the similar composition of all the different paint layers made it impossible to remove the overpaint without taking the original paint along with it. The conservators therefore identified places where



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**Top: Restored Trophy Room, Brumidi Corridors.**

Guided by evidence of the original mural, conservators restored the ceiling primarily by replication in this section of the Brumidi Corridors.

**Bottom: Flaking paint in the ceiling mural of the Trophy Room, Brumidi Corridors.**

Extreme flaking of multiple layers of delicate and porous tempera presented a challenge to the conservators.



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Eagle and wreath before and after restoration, Trophy Room, Brumidi Corridors.

During the restoration process, the overpainted mural of an eagle and wreath, *left*, was carefully retouched, *right*, using evidence of the original colors to restore the mural's illusion of carved stone.

original colors were still visible and then retouched the overpainted designs to match, restoring the subtle effect of carved stone and moldings.<sup>20</sup> Due to extensive damage, the walls in the Trophy Room and the adjacent refectory area had to be replicated. While the condition of the Trophy Room did not allow for full recovery of the original decoration, the combination of restoration and replication has reestablished the quiet beauty of this room with illusionistic stone carvings.

Conservation of Brumidi's murals is methodical, painstaking work. Professional fine art conservation is far more involved than simply repainting the murals, as was the practice throughout most of the 20th

century. Today, many who visit the Capitol marvel at the fact that Brumidi worked in the building over a 25-year period. The mural conservation program at the Capitol has already taken longer than that and will continue for years to come. To date, much has been accomplished in the conservation of the Capitol's extensive murals. Detailed reports prepared by the conservators document methods, materials, and results for each project. This information will be invaluable for future treatment and maintenance so that Brumidi's unique Capitol murals are kept in good condition for the enjoyment and inspiration of future generations.



The Congressional Gold Medal was posthumously awarded to Brumidi in 2012, in recognition of his artistic contribution to the Capitol and the nation.

### The Constantino Brumidi Congressional Gold Medal

On July 26, 2005, the 200th anniversary of his birth, Constantino Brumidi was honored by Congress with a joint ceremony in the Capitol Rotunda held under his masterpieces, *The Apotheosis of Washington* and the *Frieze of American History*. That year also marked the 150th anniversary of Brumidi's first fresco in the Capitol and the 125th anniversary of his death in 1880. Three years later, in 2008, Congress recognized Brumidi by authorizing a Congressional Gold Medal, one of the highest civilian awards in the United States.<sup>21</sup>

Congress has long presented gold medals to individuals who have performed outstanding deeds or acts of service to the security, prosperity, and national interest of the country; the first gold medal was awarded in 1776 to General George Washington. In recent years, the scope of the Congressional Gold Medal has expanded to include artists, writers, actors, scientists, explorers, athletes, and humanitarians, in addition to political and military leaders.

The front of Brumidi's gold medal bears an image of the artist based on a photograph taken by Montgomery C. Meigs. Depicted on the reverse is the central section of *The Apotheosis of Washington*. The medal was presented on July 11, 2012. Because there are no known descendants of Brumidi, the legislation authorized the medal to be displayed in the Capitol Visitor Center's Exhibition Hall, where it is seen by the millions of people each year who view Brumidi's murals on their tours of the U.S. Capitol.