

SPECIAL EDITION

# *THE CAPITOL DOME*



## CELEBRATING

*Constantino Brumidi's Life and Art*



*The next special issue of The Capitol Dome will be devoted to the bicentennial of the War of 1812 and specifically the fate of the United States Capitol in 1814, when combined British naval and land forces captured Washington, DC and set fire to many public buildings.*



*The mural (above) from the Hall of Capitols by Allyn Cox in the House wing of the Capitol illustrates the burning Capitol in the background.*

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## Contents

Rome Brought to Washington in Brumidi's Murals for the  
United States Capitol  
by Barbara Wolanin.....2

The American Artist as Scientist: Constantino Brumidi's  
Fresco of Robert Fulton for the United States Capitol  
by Thomas P. Somma.....18

"From the Giddy Height Above:" Investigating  
Constantino Brumidi's Final Days in the Capitol Rotunda  
by Jane Armstrong Hudiburg.....28

2013 Donor List.....36

Society News.....40

Marketplace.....48

**Cover:** *This profile relief portrait of George Washington, painted by Constantino Brumidi in the first room (H-144) in which he worked in the Capitol, demonstrated his ability to combine American objects and symbols with his Roman artistic training. (Image courtesy Architect of the Capitol) The photograph of the artist with his palette is from the Brady-Handy Collection in the Library of Congress.*



# Rome Brought to Washington in Brumidi's Murals for the United States Capitol

By Barbara A. Wolanin



Fig. 1A. Detail of carved relief with swan and rinceaux on the Ara Pacis, Rome. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR



Fig. 1B. Detail of wall panel with swan designed by Brumidi in the north Brumidi Corridor, Senate Wing, United States Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Constantino Brumidi's training and experience in Rome prepared him well for the role he would play as "artist of the Capitol."<sup>1</sup> When he was introduced to the engineer in charge of construction, Captain Montgomery Meigs, at the end of 1854, he must have truly seemed a godsend in response to Meigs's hope to embellish the new wings of the Capitol with frescoes. Not only did Brumidi have the knowledge and skill to paint true frescoes, he also was an expert in creating images and in styles derived from ancient Rome and the Renaissance. There are many direct correlations between what he saw, studied, and painted in Rome and the images he designed and painted on the walls and ceilings of the Capitol. By the time of his death in 1880 he had helped to accomplish Meigs's vision of a Capitol that could rival European palaces in richness and beauty of decoration.

Brumidi, born in Rome in 1805, was a mature artist nearing his fiftieth birthday when he first applied a brush to a wall of the Capitol. His father, Stauros Brumidi, was Greek, having come to Rome as an adult almost twenty-

five years earlier from the town of Philiatra on the west coast of the Peloponnesus, then part of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>2</sup> He married a Roman, Anna Maria Bianchini, in 1798. The couple operated a coffee shop at 26 Via Tor de' Conti (fig. 2A), on the site of the present Hotel Forum. They lost three children in infancy, the last one also named Costantino, so they must have been very thankful for a son who lived to adulthood. Costantino Domenico Brumidi was baptized in the church of SS. Quirico and Giulitta, around the corner from the coffee shop.<sup>3</sup> "Constantino" is the version of his name most often used after he came to America.

The Brumidi coffee shop overlooked the Forum of Augustus near the main Roman Forum, so the boy was surrounded by classical art and architecture from birth. The historical relief frieze he would have seen winding around the Column of Trajan in the nearby Forum of Trajan is the ancestor of the Frieze of American History he would paint at the end of his life around the base of the dome of the Capitol.





Fig. 2A. The Brumidi family coffee shop was on the Via Tor de' Conti, around the corner from the church and overlooking the Forum of Augustus. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR

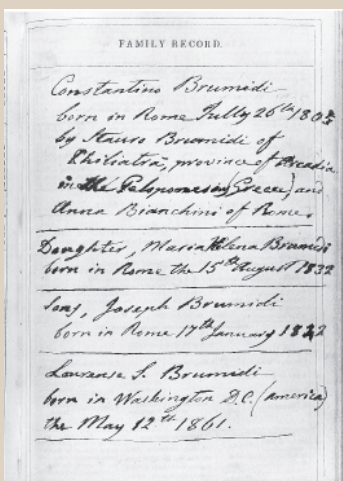


Fig. 2B. Brumidi's Family Record in his Bible. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Fig. 3A. Bertel Thorvaldsen, Nessus Abducting Deianira, 1814. THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, EUROPEAN SCULPTURE AND DECORATIVE ARTS FUND, 2004



Fig. 3B. Classical figure on an imaginary sea horse painted by Brumidi for the Naval Affairs Committee, S-127, in the U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 3A-3B. Brumidi learned to paint graceful mythological figures inspired by the works of his teachers and preeminent neoclassical sculptors such as Thorvaldsen. As a mature artist, he included them in his murals for the Capitol.

Costantino apparently showed early talent in art. At the age of 13, around 1818, he began his studies at the Accademia di San Luca (Academy of St. Luke), then located near the Piazza Venezia. There, along with his art training, he would have learned Greek and Roman history and mythology and Christian iconography. Students learned by copying the work of acknowledged masters, including their teachers. The Accademia provided a thorough foundation for creating art in the neoclassical style. It was for a short time headed by the most prominent neoclassical sculptor of the time, Antonio Canova, who was esteemed throughout Europe for his idealized nudes and reliefs. Brumidi also would have been familiar with the work of the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, a member of the Accademia and a leader in the neoclassical revival in Rome. Brumidi himself made sculpture, and in 1821, at age sixteen, he won a fifth prize for his copy of Apollo in the sculpture class.<sup>4</sup> The famous sculptors set the norm that Brumidi would follow for depicting the human figure moving in space and designing pleasing and balanced

compositions. He became adept at applying his teachers' principles of composing painted or relief scenes with figures arranged in a shallow space, which he would later apply in his work at the Capitol. In addition, the young artist also developed great skill in creating the illusion of sculpture on a flat wall during his years of study and drawing from classical sculpture at the academy.

Brumidi would later call himself "*pittore e scultore*," both a painter and a sculptor.<sup>5</sup> He is known to have completed two sculpture projects in Europe. In 1837, he was commissioned to create the sculpture for a magnificent underground chapel in San Marcello al Corso to serve as the tomb of the recently deceased Thomas Weld, an English cardinal who died in Rome.<sup>6</sup> Brumidi created four reliefs depicting major events in the life of Christ, with candelabra with angels on the altar, all in white marble (fig. 4A). The semicircular format of the reliefs provided experience for the frescoes he designed for lunettes in the Capitol (fig. 4B). It is not known whether he did the clay modeling or stone carving for the chapel himself, but, considering



the eminent sculptors under whom he studied, it is quite possible that he did. In any case, he demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of three-dimensional form and of the way light plays on it, as evident today in his trompe l'oeil sculptures and reliefs in the Capitol. A decade later, in 1849, he created four statues, two low reliefs, and a Last Supper in low relief in marble for Count Maxwell in England.<sup>7</sup> Soon after he began working at the Capitol, he sketched a design for the bronze railings of what today are called the Brumidi Staircases. He also sketched designs for benches, mirrors, and other decorative objects.

Although he clearly possessed a good understanding of sculpture, Brumidi was primarily known as a painter, and much of his study at the Accademia di San Luca was devoted to drawing and painting. Beginning in 1817, shortly before Brumidi started his studies, the president of the academy was Gaspare Landi, a neoclassical painter of Canova's generation (fig. 5A). His rich Venetian color may be reflected in Brumidi's own vivid color and texture (fig. 5B). When he was 17 years old, Brumidi won a second prize for a copy of a cupid by Landi. The next year, he was recognized for a copy of another painting by Landi. Apparently eager to increase his skills, Brumidi was among the students who signed a petition to draw and paint from a live nude model.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, his talent in copying masterpieces later led to commissions to copy a *Trinity* by Guercino in Santa Maria delle Vittoria, an *Assumption* by Annibale Carracci in Santa Maria del Popolo, and a *St. Francis in Ecstasy* by Domenichino in Santa Maria del Conception. His faithful copies may have replaced the deteriorated originals in some of the churches. In 2006, Brumidi's signature was found on a copy of the Guercino *Trinity* during its cleaning.<sup>9</sup> Brumidi's well-developed skill in copying paintings by others served him well at the Capitol, which required him to create faithful portraits of many long-dead American heroes.<sup>10</sup>

One of Brumidi's major painting teachers was Baron Vincenzo Camuccini, who was known for history paintings and portraits in the neoclassical style (fig. 6A). He served a second term as president of the academy from 1822 to 1827. Camuccini admired Nicolas Poussin and Raphael and was a friend of Jacques Louis David. He was close to the Pope, so it is possible that he recommended Brumidi for work in the Vatican.<sup>11</sup> At the end of his life, Brumidi was called "the Michelangelo of the Capitol," but, more correctly, he should be called "the Raphael of the Capitol," because the High Renaissance painter so admired by his teacher was his greatest inspiration. His love of Raphael may have been reinforced by the revival of early



Fig. 4A. Constantino Brumidi, *Pieta*, 1837–42, one of four marble reliefs in the Weld-Clifford Chapel, Church of San Marcello al Corso, Rome. VASARI STUDIO FOTOGRAFICO



Fig. 5A. Gaspare Landi, *Meeting of Hector and Andromache*, 1794. PUBLIC DOMAIN PHOTOGRAPH, THE ATHENAEUM





Fig. 4B. Constantino Brumidi, *The Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow*, 1855, painted for the House Committee on Agriculture, H-144, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 4A-4B. Brumidi's training in sculpture gave him the skills to design graceful scenes with figures arranged in a shallow space. In both his marble relief for the Roman tomb and in his first fresco for the Capitol, his use of light and shadow makes the figures look three dimensional.



Fig. 5B. Constantino Brumidi, *Telegraph*, 1867, S-211, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 5A-5B. Brumidi made copies of Landi's paintings as a student and used a similar palette of deep reds and blues for the draperies of his comparable neoclassical figures.





Fig. 6A. Vincenzo Camuccini, *Hecuba Entrusts the Boy Paris to Archelaus*, c. 1796. ACCADEMIA NAZIONALE DI SAN LUCA, ROME



Fig. 6B. Constantino Brumidi, *Columbia Welcoming the South Back into the Union*, 1876, S-212, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 6A-6B. Brumidi's teacher Camuccini taught him how to convincingly paint groups of classical figures in a landscape. Brumidi created original American mythology in his late fresco for the Capitol.

Renaissance art in Rome, called "Purismo," a reaction against the excesses of the late Baroque and Rococo style and a return to the "purer" art of early Raphael, where balanced figures were placed parallel to the picture plane. The "Manifesto of Purism" published in 1842 would have been familiar to Brumidi, since its main author, Antonio Bianchini, was a cousin.<sup>12</sup> In 1842 Brumidi named his son Giuseppe Antonio Raffaello Brumidi.

Raphael's influence on Brumidi's designs for the Capitol is clear. For example, the overall design of the ceiling mural (fig. 7B) of the President's Room (S-216) is clearly inspired by that of the ceiling of Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican (fig. 7A). Brumidi's Venus in the scene of "Marine" in *The Apotheosis of George Washington* is a sister to Raphael's Galatea in the Villa Farnesina in Rome. Brumidi's Madonnas and allegorical figures are descendants of Raphael's.

The first-floor Senate corridor designs were inspired by those in Raphael's Loggia in the Vatican, themselves inspired by first-century Roman murals. Brumidi's cherubs, found in many of his Capitol murals, are in the lineage of Raphael's, and even farther back in time of those painted in first-century Pompeii. Brumidi would have known Raphael's work in person, as he may have the frescoes in Herculaneum and Pompeii, which were well published by the nineteenth century.

Compounding his love of Raphael's vision, Brumidi also emulated the seventeenth-century artists who were themselves inspired by Raphael and by classical art. Guido Reni was one of the greatest neoclassicists among the

Baroque artists; Brumidi more than once made oil-painted copies of Reni's ceiling fresco *Aurora*.<sup>13</sup> Foremost among the seventeenth-century neoclassicists was Annibale Carracci, who painted illusionistic sculptures framing paintings, as Brumidi would later do in the lunettes of the Senate Reception Room (S-213) in the Capitol.

In addition to his talent for composition and ability to copy and adapt inspirational works, Brumidi's training and early experience allowed him to gain great competence in the materials and techniques of painting and the skills needed to manage a project.

An important aspect of Purismo was the revival of the fresco technique used by the Renaissance and classical Baroque masters. When Brumidi appeared before Captain Meigs in Washington, he claimed to be an expert in fresco, the very medium Meigs envisioned for the walls of the Capitol Extension. The technique of painting on fresh plaster demands special knowledge and skill, which Meigs had not been able to find any American artist willing to learn. As far as is known, Brumidi was the only artist in the country capable of painting scenes in true fresco at the time he painted his trial fresco, *The Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow*, completed in 1855 in today's Room H-144.

In addition to fresco, Brumidi mastered the whole range of painting mediums, including oil and oil/casein emulsions and tempera (or distemper), consisting of loosely-bound water-based pigments, which at the Capitol were mixed with white glue. He often applied tempera on ceilings or in between frescoed scenes, and because the matte surfaces look similar from a distance, the different



mediums are indiscernible.

Brumidi had learned in Rome how to be part of a team of painters and craftsmen working to decorate large expanses of wall with a carefully designed decorative scheme. He would call himself the “director of the works,” a role greatly needed at the Capitol when he was overseeing several teams of artists with different skills and from different countries of origin. Perhaps he first honed his management skills when, upon the death of his father, and while still developing his skills as an artist, he took over the family coffee shop and was listed in documents as a “*pittore e caffetiere*” (i.e., painter and coffee-shop owner).<sup>14</sup>

Brumidi said he had been a student for fourteen years.<sup>15</sup> His first known opportunity to apply what he had learned at the academy to a real project on the walls of a nearby palace came in 1836, when he was 31 years old. This was the beginning of his work for the wealthy Torlonia family. Prince Alessandro Torlonia had inherited his wealth and royal title from his successful banker father, who had acquired the title of Duke and purchased a seventeenth-century palace on the Piazza Venezia that he filled with painting and sculpture. His son had teams of artists decorate the Palazzo Torlonia with elaborate murals.

The Torlonia palace was torn down for the construction of the monument to Victor Emmanuel in 1900-1901, but fortunately the murals and rooms were photographed first, and the subjects of the murals were recorded by Giuseppe Checchetelli, who credited Brumidi for painting the Torlonia coat of arms in the Throne Room and a frieze depicting the Glory of Constantine.<sup>16</sup> The female figure of Prudence captured in a photograph (fig. 8A) is very much like the ones Brumidi would later paint in the President’s Room in the Capitol (fig. 8B). In the same photograph, the illusionistic frieze, probably the one by Brumidi, painted to look like a carved stone relief, prefigures Brumidi’s frieze at the base of the Capitol dome.

In the Torlonia palace he also painted the times of day and decorated a gallery leading from the apartment of the prince with hunters and bacchantes, in the Pompeian style (fig. 9A); that project would prepare him to design murals for the prince’s new theater and later for the Senate Naval Affairs Committee in a room (S-127, now the Senate Appropriations Room) in the Capitol, also decorated in the Pompeian style with floating bacchantes or maenads (fig. 9B). Brumidi’s frescoes in the palace’s neo-gothic chapel won praise: “The colors and harmony of the entire decoration are such that Brumidi’s name will be accepted from now on among the greatest artists of all time.”<sup>17</sup>

In September 1842 Brumidi entered into an agreement



Fig. 7A. Raphael, ceiling of the Stanza della Segnatura, 1508–1511, Vatican Museums, Rome. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR



Fig. 7B. Constantino Brumidi, ceiling of the President’s Room, 1860, S-216, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 7A-7B. Brumidi intentionally adopted the multi-section design of Raphael’s ceiling in the Vatican for the President’s Room in the Capitol.



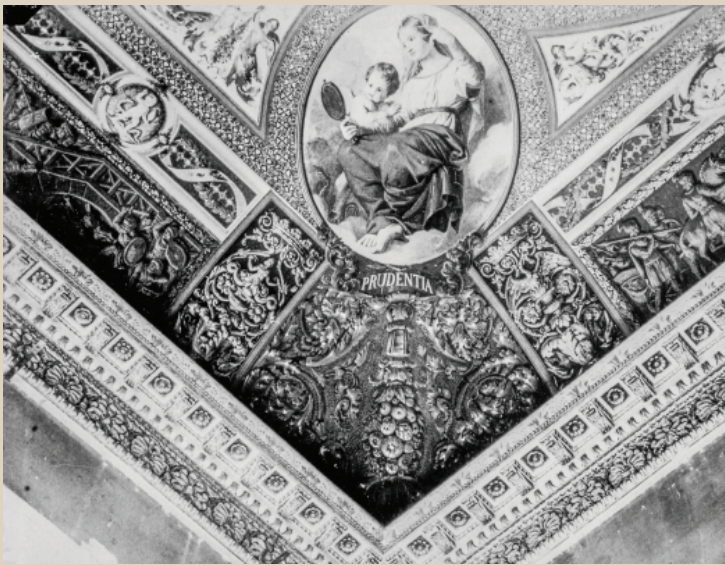


Fig. 8A. Attributed to Constantino Brumidi, Prudence and illusionistic carved relief, 1836, Palazzo Torlonia, Rome (destroyed).  
COURTESY MARCO FABIO APOLLONI



Fig. 8B. Constantino Brumidi, spring ceiling with the Four Seasons, 1856, H-144, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 8A-8B. In Rome, Brumidi achieved mastery in painting allegorical figures floating on clouds surrounded by illusionistic carved stone reliefs; he used this skill well in his first room for the Capitol.



Fig. 9A. Constantino Brumidi, floating bacchante, c. 1844-45, theater of the Villa Torlonia, Rome. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR



Fig. 9B. Constantino Brumidi, floating maiden with banner, c. 1857, S-127, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 9A-9B. Brumidi delighted in painting maenads or bacchantes (floating maidens representing followers of the god of wine) in his murals in Rome and at the Capitol.





Fig. 10A. (above) Constantino Brumidi, *The Judgment of Paris*, 1845, theater of the Villa Torlonia. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR

Fig. 10B. (below) Constantino Brumidi (executed by Camillo Bischoff), lunette with classical architecture and bronze vessels, 1858, S-127, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL



Figs. 10A-10B. Brumidi's design for the lunettes for the Capitol were directly inspired by Pompeiian murals and resemble lunettes that he painted in the theater of the Villa Torlonia in Rome.



Fig. 11A. (left) Constantino Brumidi, detail of illusionistic columns and vase, c. 1844, theater of the Villa Torlonia, Rome. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR

Fig. 11B. (right) Constantino Brumidi, detail of illusionistic column, 1857, S-127, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL



Figs. 11A-11B. Similar motifs, such as leafy golden columns, can be found in his murals in Rome and in the Capitol.





Fig. 12A. (left) Constantino Brumidi, illusionistic relief of genius figure, c. 1844, theater of the Villa Torlonia, Rome. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR

Fig. 12B. (right) Constantino Brumidi, genius figure carrying basket of flowers, Brumidi Corridor, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 12A-12B. Brumidi's repertory of classical images and elements was integral to his designs for murals in the Capitol.



Fig. 13A. Constantino Brumidi, ceiling painted to look like carved stone, c. 1844, theater of the Villa Torlonia, Rome. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR



Fig. 13B. Constantino Brumidi, ceiling painted to look like carved stone, c. 1859, Trophy Room, Brumidi Corridors, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 13A-13B. Brumidi brought to the Capitol his skill in painting flat walls to look like richly coffered and carved stone.



to work at the Villa Torlonia outside of Porta Pia for 800 scudi.<sup>18</sup> This amount, enough for someone to live on for three years, is believed to have been his payment for decorating the new theater that Alessandro Torlonia had begun constructing in 1841 to celebrate his marriage to Vittoria Colonna of the venerable Roman family. The sculptor Thorvaldsen designed the reliefs. The walls and ceilings of the many rooms were covered with murals, mostly with classical motifs around the theme of the loves of the gods in celebration of the marriage. During the conservation of murals in the theater of the Villa Torlonia, opened to the public in December 2013, Brumidi's signature and dates of 1844 and 1845 were discovered on three lunettes.<sup>19</sup>

A decade later, Brumidi would import many of the motifs he designed for the theater to the Capitol (figs. 10B and 11B). The lunettes with murals framed by Pompeian architectural structure and leafy coloettes can also be seen in the room that he designed for the Senate Naval Affairs Committee (S-127), painted in 1856–1858. The elaborate use of illusionistic stone coffers and moldings is a principal element of both spaces, and illusionistic columns like those in the theater reappear on the lower walls (figs. 13A and 13B). Figures whose lower body grow into leafy rinceaux representing spirits, which he called “genii,” are found in the theater (fig. 12A), in a drawing in a sketchbook he brought from Rome, and in the Brumidi Corridors in the Capitol (fig. 12B).

Not only was Brumidi working for the wealthiest family in Rome, he also painted for popes and in the Vatican. Between 1840 and 1842 Brumidi participated in the restoration of the Third Loggia of the Vatican Palace (the Loggia della Cosmografia), which had been painted by in the second half of the sixteenth century. Here he had further expanded his fresco skills, working under his former teacher Camuccini and Filippo Agricola, who would become president of the Accademia, and with his contemporary Domenico Tojetti. Brumidi and Tojetti restored the three frescoes in the vault of the eleventh bay and end wall dedicated to Pope Gregory XVI, who sponsored the restoration.<sup>20</sup> In addition to providing him both experience and good income, this work in the Vatican undoubtedly brought him to the attention of the Vatican officials and to American priests studying in Rome, who would later pave his way in the United States.

Most important for his later work in the Capitol, his work in the Third Loggia would likely have given him close acquaintance with Raphael's Loggia on the floor below (fig. 14A). That loggia was the model that Meigs

envisioned for the walls and ceilings of the first-floor vaulted corridors of the new Senate wing of the Capitol, now called the Brumidi Corridors (fig. 14B), after seeing color illustrations of it in the Astor Library in New York.<sup>21</sup> Raphael's designs were themselves directly inspired by the recently discovered murals in the Golden House of Nero (Domus Aurea).

Brumidi's designs for the Senate corridors, painted mainly between 1857 and 1859, have panels with designs and subjects directly inspired by the work of Raphael and his workshop. In addition to the overall designs, the vertical panels with squirrels and rodents or birds on leafy rinceaux, hanging fruits, flowers on black backgrounds, and the classical gods and goddesses he designed for the Capitol all find correlations in Raphael's Loggia (figs. 15A, 15B, 16B, and 17B).

Brumidi's talents were so esteemed in Rome that he was chosen to paint the official portrait of Pope Pius IX, just elected in 1846; Brumidi's dynamic and richly colored portrait (fig. 18A) is today one of the largest and most impressive in the collection, and he was commissioned to make more than one copy of it. They were most likely painted in his studio in the parish of S. Maria de' Monti. The next year, he unsuccessfully sought a government position as assistant to the inspector of public painting of Rome, his mentor Filippo Agricola.<sup>22</sup> Brumidi's former teacher Camuccini was in charge of creating mosaics with portraits of historical popes for an exterior frieze on St. Paul's Outside the Walls, and in 1848 and 1849 Brumidi painted fifteen oil paintings as models for the mosaics.<sup>23</sup> His talent for creating lifelike portraits of historical figures as well as from life would continue to be valuable for his work at the Capitol (fig. 18B).

Unfortunately, Brumidi's artistic talents and good connections could not avert a dramatic change of fortune in 1849, when he was caught up in the revolutionary uprising that drove Pius IX out of the city and declared a republic. After five months, French troops attacked Rome and the city was in a state of war. Brumidi was not one of the radical artists who participated in the revolution, and he even forbade political discussions or the reading of newspapers in his coffee shop.<sup>24</sup> However, as captain of the Civic Guard he removed for safekeeping objects and paintings from convents that were to house troops or might be bombed, and although he returned them after Pius IX was restored in 1850, he would later be arrested for these actions and other charges.<sup>25</sup>

After the revolution was quelled, he was invited by Archbishop John Hughes of New York, who was in Rome





Fig. 14A. Raphael's Loggia, 1508-11, Vatican Palace, Vatican State. PHOTOGRAPH BY GASPARD MILTIADÉ



Fig. 14B. North Corridor, Brumidi Corridors, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 14A-14B. Brumidi's skill and knowledge made real Captain Meigs's vision of having the Senate corridors decorated like Raphael's Loggia in the Vatican.



Fig. 15B. Constantino Brumidi (with James Leslie), detail of panel with squirrels, 1857-59, Brumidi Corridor, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

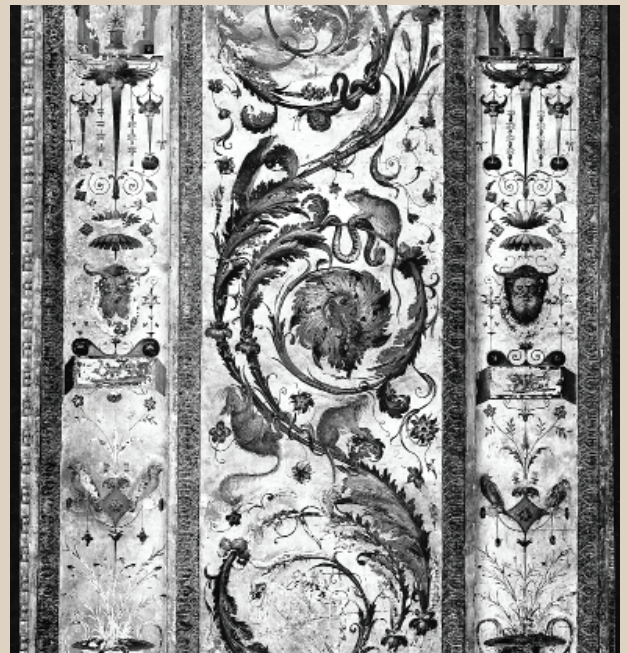


Fig. 15A. Detail of panel with squirrels, 1508-11, Raphael's Loggia, Vatican Palace, Vatican State. ALINARI/ART RESOURCE, NY

Figs. 15A-15B. Some of Brumidi's most delightful panels, with squirrels and rodents scampering on the leafy scrolling vines, were directly inspired by a section of Raphael's Loggia in the Vatican.





Fig. 16A. (above left) Constantino Brumidi, panel with flowers on black background, c. 1844, theater of the Villa Torlonia, Rome. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR

Fig. 16B. (above right) Constantino Brumidi, panel with flowers on black background, c. 1844, Brumidi Corridor, U.S. Capitol.

ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 16A-16B. Brumidi brought geometric designs, colors, and motifs such as flowers on a dark background from his murals in the theater at the Villa Torlonia to the Capitol.



Fig. 17A. Panel with trophy of musical instruments in the theater of the Villa Torlonia designed by Brumidi, c. 1844. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR

Fig. 17B. The trophy of musical instruments in the west end of the North Corridor may have been painted by James Leslie.

ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL



Fig. 18A. (above) Constantino Brumidi, Pope Pius IX, 1847, Vatican Museums. COURTESY OF DR. PELLGRINO NAZZARO

Fig. 18B. (below) Constantino Brumidi, Benjamin Franklin, 1860, S-216, President's Room, U.S. Capitol.

ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL



Figs. 18A-18B. Brumidi put his ability to produce richly painted and life-like portraits to good use in many of his Capitol murals and American oil portraits.



in 1850 and 1851, to come to New York to decorate new Catholic churches with frescoes. Brumidi also met the American John Norris, who studied for the priesthood in Rome between 1848 and 1851, and hoped to travel to the United States with him. When he came to Washington he would stay with Norris's family and paint their portraits.<sup>26</sup>

In 1850 Brumidi undertook his last important Roman commission, the creation of frescoes for the Sanctuary of the Madonna dell'Archetto, a small church, designed by Virginio Vespignani to honor a miraculous image of the Virgin painted in 1690. Under the dome Brumidi painted an Immaculate Conception (fig. 19A), with the virtues of Wisdom, Prudence, Strength (fig. 20A), and Innocence in the pendentives and cherubs in panels; very similar figures would reappear in the Capitol (fig. 19B), particularly in the virtues in the Senate Reception Room (fig. 20B). Brumidi's talent was praised, and a critic judged that he had reached pictorial effects second only to the great masters of the High Renaissance.<sup>27</sup>

Brumidi did not get to attend the dedication of the chapel on May 31, 1851, because on February 4 he was arrested and imprisoned in the Carceri Nuove (New Prisons). He was accused of larceny, extortion, and other crimes. In his defense, Brumidi cited the portrait he had painted of Pius IX. He stated that he had refused to join the most extreme and liberal groups of artists. He expressed concern about not being able to paint and to support his family. By April, when these pleadings failed to get him released, he hired a lawyer to defend him. In June, he first asked to be allowed to leave for the United States in order to paint altar pieces and frescoes for churches, as suggested by American Archbishop John Hughes. He complained about his poor health and respiratory problems, which worsened when he was temporarily transferred to an inferior prison.

In the fall of 1851, he again requested permission from the secretary of state of the Holy See and the general of the French occupation to leave for the United States to paint for a church. His case finally came to trial in late December. The Vatican records of the Pope's advisory body, the Sacra Consulta, include the accusations against Brumidi as well as numerous testimonials in his favor from priests and even the French military. However, on January 2, 1852, he was sentenced to eighteen years in prison. After petitions from the monks who supported him, the sentence was reduced by two-thirds, and a recommendation was made to have him carry out his penalty in exile. Finally, on March 20, Pius IX ordered Brumidi released from prison with a full pardon.<sup>28</sup> No doubt convinced that a better future awaited him in the New World, the artist

put his affairs in order and sailed for America, arriving in New York on September 18, 1852.<sup>29</sup> This was a year after the cornerstone for the Capitol Extension had been laid; once the walls were up and rooms constructed, the building would be ready for the arrival of a skilled muralist.

When Captain Montgomery Meigs, who was in charge of construction and had been searching for someone to paint frescoes in the Capitol, met the almost-fifty-year-old Italian émigré in late December 1854, he described him as "a lively old man."<sup>30</sup> He allowed the artist to demonstrate his skill in the room he was using as an office. The resulting fresco, *The Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow* in present-day room H-144, made it clear that Meigs now had at his disposal the talents of a mature and accomplished artist, whom he put on the payroll. Brumidi designed and painted or oversaw the painting of murals in the Capitol almost full-time until 1865, the year he completed *The Apotheosis of George Washington* in the Rotunda, and he was sporadically hired to work in the Capitol over the rest of his life. At the time of his death in 1880, after having spent a third of his life focused on the Capitol, he had completed part of the Rotunda frieze and was working on the full-size cartoons for the remaining scenes. It was fortunate indeed that he had arrived in Washington, D.C., just at the time when the United States Capitol was being expanded with House and Senate extensions and a new dome.

Today, the study of Brumidi's conserved work in the Capitol allows us to appreciate the knowledge and skills he brought from Rome. He used his thorough understanding of the principles of neoclassical art and amply showed his ability to paint convincing depictions of the human body. He artfully arranged figures in balanced compositions across the surface and in space. He almost magically created the illusion of three-dimensional forms on flat surfaces through effects of light and shade. His academic training had given him deep knowledge of classical and Renaissance examples and styles and the ability to make accurate copies. His experience designing for and working in elaborate architectural complexes for powerful people and working with teams of artists and craftsmen served him well, as did his familiarity with a variety of art mediums and techniques. He also had the flexibility that enabled him to adapt to his new country and to highlight American symbols and history.

Constantino Brumidi's Roman training and experience were indispensable preparation for his accomplishments at the Capitol, and they allowed him to earn a level of accomplishment and recognition that he might never have





Fig. 19A. Constantino Brumidi, Madonna of the Immaculate Conception, 1850, Church of the Madonna dell'Archetto, Rome.

VASARI STUDIO FOTOGRAFICO



Fig. 19B. Constantino Brumidi, Legislation, 1860, S-216, President's Room, U.S. Capitol. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 19A-19B. Brumidi's sculpturally posed allegorical female figures in the Capitol are direct descendants of religious figures he painted in Rome.



Fig. 20A. Constantino Brumidi, Strength in pendentive of dome, 1850, Church of the Madonna dell'Archetto, Rome.

VASARI STUDIO FOTOGRAFICO



Fig. 20B. Constantino Brumidi, Strength in pendentive of dome, 1858, S-213, Senate Reception Room, U.S. Capitol.

ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Figs. 20A-20B. Brumidi varied the way he portrayed allegorical figures but they were always fully three-dimensional and well-composed within the architectural space.



attained had he remained simply one among legions of artists in his native country. So, too, was his experience under the Roman Republic a preparation for sympathetically depicting scenes from the American Revolution as well as appreciating his own life and freedom in his new nation. A painting he is said to have brought with him depicting Christian martyrs may well reflect his recent distressing imprisonment. Perhaps his most frequently quoted statement is his 1855 wish that he might “live long enough to make beautiful the Capitol of the one country on Earth in which there is liberty.”<sup>31</sup> Brumidi never returned to Rome. He applied for United States citizenship soon after he landed, and he became a naturalized U.S. citizen in November 1857. He became well respected as “the artist of the Capitol.” In bringing Rome to Washington, he became part of American history.



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*Detail of the profile relief portrait of George Washington that Brumidi painted in his first room in the Capitol, H-144. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL*

## Notes

1. Until a century after his death, little was known about Brumidi's life and work in Rome by either Capitol Curator Charles Fairman or Myrtle Cheney Murdock, who published *Constantino Brumidi: Michelangelo of the United States Capitol* (Washington, D.C.: Monumental Press, Inc., 1950). In the 1970s, Professor Pellegrino Nazzaro got access to the Vatican archives; he contributed the chapter on Brumidi's Italian years for my book *Constantino Brumidi: Artist of the Capitol* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1998). By the early 1990s, more documents were uncovered in Rome by curator Alberta Campitelli and art historian Barbara Steindl, “Constantino Brumidi da Roma a Washington. Vicende e opera di un artistromanoo,” *Richerche di Storie dell'arte* 46 (1992). Henry Hope Reed, in preparation for *The United States Capitol: Its Architecture and Decoration* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), hired Dr. Maria Antonietta de Angelis to find and make copies of the Roman documents related to Brumidi; he graciously shared them with me. Visits to Rome and overseeing the conservation of Brumidi's murals have been vital to my understanding of his art and sources. I have greatly benefitted from the insights, knowledge, and discoveries of conservators, first Bernard Rabin and his team and then Christiana Cunningham Adams for the past two decades.

2. Stauros Brumidi (1752–1829) came to Rome in 1781. His name also appears in documents as “Stauro Bromedi” or in the Italian version as “Croce Brumidi,” since his first name meant “cross.” Travelers have told me that there are still people with the name Brumidi living in Philiatra.

3. Archivio Storico del Vicariato, Rome (ASVR), Tabularium Vicariatus Urbis, Parish of SS. Quirico and Guilitta.

4. Archives of the Accademia di San Luca: Misc. Cong. II, n. 7, September 30, 1821.

5. In 1849 Brumidi described himself as both painter and sculptor in his request for a position with the Roman Republic. Archivio di Stato di Roma (ASR), Camerlengato, Titolo IV, Parte II, b. 290 (int. 3284).

6. Later named the Weld-Clifford Chapel, it was constructed by the architect Agostino Giorgioli in 1838.

7. Campitelli and Steindl, “Constantino Brumidi,” p. 49 and note 17, p. 59.

8. September 29, 1822, and September 29, 1823, Archives of the Accademia di San Luca.



9. A.V. Jervis, "Costantino Brumidi," *La Pittura in Italia: L'Ottocento*, Milan: Elect, 1991. The discovery of the signature was announced at a May 12, 2006 conference on Brumidi in Rome.

10. For example, Brumidi copied Rembrandt Peale's portrait of George Washington in the Senate Chamber for his mural in the President's Room, and the faces of the signers in his fresco *Signing of the Treaty of Peace with Great Britain* were copied from famous portraits.

11. "Antonio Camuccini," *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiani, 17, 1970, pp. 627-630.

12. The other signers of *Del purismo nelle arti* were Tommaso Minardi, Friedrich Overbeck, and Pietro Tenerani. G. Di Genova-G. Orioli, "BIANCHINI, Antonio". In *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. X, Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1968.

13. The copy of Guido Reni's *Aurora* that Brumidi gave to Moses Titcomb is now in the Dartmouth College Museum and Galleries, Gift of Moses Titcomb, 1879. Another copy was auctioned by Adam A. Weschler and Son in 1970 and again in 2003.

14. The coffee shop would be a major part of his livelihood. In 1832 he married Maria Covaluzzi, six weeks before their daughter, Maria Elena Brumidi, was born. His wife died in 1838, less than a year after his mother's death. Within four months of becoming a young widower, undoubtedly needing a mother for his young daughter and someone to help run the coffee shop, as well as the benefit of a dowry, he married sixteen-year-old Anna Rovelli. Their son, Giuseppe Antonio Raffaello Brumidi, was born in early 1842. ASVR, Tabularium Vicariatus Rubis, Parish of SS. Quirico et Giuilitta.

15. "The Critic," unidentified newspaper clipping, c. 1880; B. Delaney, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 1972, p. 513.

16. Guiseppe Chechetelli, *Una giornata de osservazione nel Palazzo e nella Villa di S.E. il Principe D. Alessandro Torlonia* (Rome: Tipografia de Crispino Pucinelli, 1842), pp. 8-9.

17. Chechetelli, *Una giornata*, pp. 57-58 and 60.

18. Marco Fabio Apolloni, Alberta Campitelli, Antonio Pinelli, Barbara Steindl, "La Villa di Alessandro Torlonia," in *La Nuova Italia Scientifica, Recherche de Storia dell'arte* 28-29, 1987, pp. 5-35, and Appendix 6, p. 167.

19. Under curator Alberta Campitelli, the murals were documented and published, their conservation was undertaken, and funding was found to fully restore the theater. See Alberta Campitelli, ed., *Villa Torlonia: L'Ultima Impresa del Mecanatismo Romano*, Rome: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1997; Alberta Campitelli, ed., *Villa Torlonia: Guida*, Rome: Commune di Roma, 2006.

20. Pellegrino Nazzaro, "The Italian Years," in Wolanin, *Constantino Brumidi*, pp. 16-17 and note 6, p. 23.

21. Wendy Wolff, ed., *Capitol Builder: The Shorthand Journals of Montgomery C. Meigs, 1853-1859, 1861* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), p. 106. Jamie Whitacre discovered that the three volumes are now in the Morgan Library in New York.

22. Letter from Secretary of State [Giacomo Antonelli] to Cardinal Camerlengo [Riario Sforza] enclosing the petition of Brumidi to the Pope (ASR, Camerlengato, Titolo IV, Parte II, b. 290 (int. 3284).

23. Nazzaro, "The Italian Years," p. 20.

24. Giulio Romano, "Costantino Brumidi un Michelangelo da Esportai," *Concretezza*, Aug. 16, 1976, pp 29-31.

25. In May 1849, when convents were taken over to house troops, Brumidi removed furniture, paintings, and valuables to his studio and the Lateran Palace. ASR, Archivio Repubblica Romana 1849, vol. 62, f. 154. The record of his admission into prison lists him as a shopkeeper (negoziante). ASR, Sacra Consulta Processi Politici, b. 231, posiz. n. 373).

26. Nazzaro, "The Italian Years," p. 20. Brumidi painted portraits of Dr. John Norris, William J. Norris, and Mrs. William J. Norris, all in private collections.

27. Lamberto De Camillis, *La Madonna dell'Archetto, Storia del piu' piccolo santuario Mariano di Roma*, Rome: Edizione Soc. Promotrice di Buone Opere, 1951, p. 32.

28. Nazzaro, "The Italian Years," p. 22, endnotes 22 and 23, p. 23.

29. Date inscribed in the Bible given to him by the American Bible Society, donated to the Architect of the Capitol by Mildred Thompson.

30. December 28, 1854, Wendy Wolff, ed., *Capitol Builder*, p. 180.

31. Smith D. Fry, *Thrilling Story of the Wonderful Capitol Building and Its Marvelous Decorations* (n.p., 1911), p. 41.



# The American Artist as Scientist

## Constantino Brumidi's Fresco of Robert Fulton for the United States Capitol

by Thomas P. Somma

On Monday, August 17, 1807, at one o'clock in the afternoon, Robert Fulton's North River Steamboat (now known to history as the *Clermont*), began its epochal maiden voyage up the Hudson River from New York City to Albany, traveling the distance in a mere thirty-two hours, faster than any sailing vessel could hope to manage. Four days later, the *Clermont* (fig. 1) safely returned without fanfare to its dock in Greenwich Village. While the immediate response to Fulton's triumph was less than enthusiastic, the steamboat quickly became an American icon, recognized everywhere as symbolic of a pivotal moment in the commercial destiny of the nation.<sup>1</sup>

The *Clermont*'s success signaled more than the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the United States. As Kirkpatrick Sale argues in his biography of Fulton, this event revealed in a particularly effective way the principles of the American dream as that dream took shape during the late colonial and early republic periods: "the pursuit of happiness through material betterment, Yankee know-how in service to technological improvement, a belief in human perfectibility and individual achievement, a material destiny of expansion and conquest, and a government formed to advance industry and promote prosperity."<sup>2</sup>

Originally trained as a miniature portrait painter, Fulton left the United States in 1787 to study with the influential American expatriate painter Benjamin West (1738–1820), with whom he developed a close and sustained personal relationship. But by the mid-1790s, Fulton had laid his paints and pictures aside to concentrate on activities more related to the mechanical arts—especially canal building, the design of torpedoes, and steam-powered navigation—as more practical, not to mention more lucrative, outlets for his talents and ambitions. In redirecting his artistic energies into technological invention, Fulton exemplified the artist as scientist, a phenomenon rooted in the Renaissance and a relatively common occurrence in post-Revolutionary War America.

Fulton's shift from artist to inventor would not have seemed as curious to early American republicans as it might to us today. For one thing, as Joseph J. Ellis explains in *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (1979), eighteenth-century America's "enthusiasm for the arts was part of a larger enthusiasm for the benign effects of liberation that accompanied the emergence of market conditions in colonial society." Thus, for late eighteenth-century Americans, "politics, the arts, economic development, and demography, were not separate spheres of human activity but interlaced strands comprising the social fabric. . . . [A]rtistic creativity and economic productivity both [were considered] natural consequences of liberal political conditions."<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, American attitudes toward art and artists became increasingly ambivalent during the post-Revolutionary War period. In fact, "as the arts became more visible," Ellis continues, "they became the favorite target of ministers, political officials, and pamphleteers who described themselves as guardians of the virtuous principles for which, they claimed, the Revolution had supposedly been fought." Consequently, more and more Americans came to associate the arts "with degeneration rather than progress."<sup>4</sup>

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Fig. 1. A full-size replica of the steamer *Clermont* was built in 1909. Here it is seen photographed at anchor.



Fig. 2. Constantino Brumidi, Robert Fulton, c. 1873  
Fresco, over the door to Senate Room 116, United States Capitol.



The growing hostility toward the arts and high culture in general during the decades after the Revolution forced American artists to make difficult judgments regarding the nation's prospects and their own professional possibilities. Thus, as Ellis accurately predicts, we encounter men from this period, such as Robert Fulton, "who combined an incredibly optimistic estimate of America's cultural potential with a deep distrust of their own artistic callings, hatred for the pecuniary values of the marketplace with considerable skill as entrepreneurs, [and] intense private ambition with a genuine craving to channel their creative energies into public service."<sup>5</sup>

Nearly three-quarters of a century after the *Clermont* made its inaugural trip up the Hudson, Constantino Brumidi produced an historical portrait of Fulton as part of his extensive ongoing mural decoration for the interior of the United States Capitol (fig. 2). Brumidi's fresco of Fulton reaffirmed the cultural principles originally embodied in the steamboat. It is also a particularly well-constructed illustration of the artist turned scientist, and

one of the best examples among Brumidi's Capitol decorations of a work of art intended to evoke authentic American meanings without relying heavily on the use of mythology, allegory, or overt classical allusions.

The Fulton fresco, however, was not the first portrait of the American inventor painted by Brumidi. The artist also included Fulton in an allegory of science (fig. 3), one of the secondary groups comprising Brumidi's monumental *Apotheosis of Washington*, completed for the Capitol Rotunda in 1865. In the scene, Fulton and two other American inventors—Benjamin Franklin and Samuel F.B. Morse, the latter another significant American artist turned scientist—look on as two workmen use an electric generator to store power in batteries.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 3. Constantino Brumidi, "Science", detail from Apotheosis of Washington, 1865. Fresco, canopy of the Rotunda, United States Capitol.



Fig. 4. Christian Schussele, Men of Progress: American Inventors, 1862. Oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

As Michael Quick has noted in *American Portraiture in the Grand Manner, 1720–1920* (1981), a group portrait bringing together the most innovative leaders in art, science, politics, etc. "was a popular form at mid-century."<sup>7</sup> Probably the best-known work of this type is Christian Schussele's *Men of Progress* (fig. 4), now at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, which presents a veritable pantheon of contemporary American inventors. Morse with his telegraph occupies the center of the



painting; a portrait of Benjamin Franklin hangs on the back wall to the left.<sup>8</sup> Painted in 1862, *Men of Progress* is exactly contemporary with Brumidi's *Apotheosis of Washington*.



Fig. 2A. Constantino Brumidi, Benjamin Franklin, c. 1873. Fresco, over the door to Senate Room 117, United States Capitol.



Fig. 2B. Constantino Brumidi, John Fitch, c. 1876. Fresco, over the door to Senate Room 118, United States Capitol.

Brumidi's fresco *Robert Fulton* is one of three frescoed lunettes celebrating important American inventors—Benjamin Franklin (fig. 2A) and John Fitch (fig. 2B) are the subjects of the other two paintings. The lunettes decorate the Patent Corridor, part of the network of hallways known today as the Brumidi Corridors located on the first floor of the Senate wing of the Capitol. Brumidi and his team of assistants began decorating the corridors in the late 1850s. Brumidi himself painted the frescoed lunettes between 1873 and 1878. The overall design for the corridors, as Barbara Wolanin has explained, integrated American motifs within a classical framework, identifying the Senate as “an institution with roots in the classical world.”<sup>9</sup>

The Fulton fresco fills the lunette above room S-116 located at the east end of the north corridor. The painting's subject reflects the function of the Senate committee then occupying the room, the Committee on Patents. Today the Committee on Foreign Relations meets in S-116. *Fulton* is the largest and most accessible of the frescoed lunettes in the Brumidi Corridors, visible the entire length of the north corridor, thus providing a focal point within the decorative program for that part of the Capitol.<sup>10</sup>

The wide lunette shows Fulton seated in his studio. On his desk sits a mechanical model, “probably a steamboat walking beam,”<sup>11</sup> and an assortment of steamboat plans spread open for easy access; a pile of books lies at the inventor's feet. To Fulton's right the draperies are pulled back to reveal a view of the palisades of the Hudson River and his steamboat, the *Clermont*, to which Fulton directs the viewer's attention with a gesture of his right hand. Behind Fulton, tucked into the corner of the fresco, sit his abandoned painting materials and, on the easel, an unfinished copy of Benjamin West's 1819 self-portrait, a work once owned by the Congress and now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Benjamin West, Self-Portrait, 1819. Oil on papeboard, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.







MARSH-BILLINGS-ROCKEFELLER NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Fig. 6. Constantino Brumidi, Preliminary Sketch for Robert Fulton, c. 1873-75. Oil on canvas, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, Woodstock, Vermont.

A preliminary oil sketch by Brumidi for the Fulton fresco is in the collection of the Marsh-Billings National Historical Park in Woodstock, Vermont (fig. 6). Long mislabeled on the frame face as a self-portrait by Fulton, the work was correctly re-attributed in 1996.<sup>12</sup> The fresco closely follows the sketch in general design. Brumidi did make several minor changes, however, including reducing the compositional prominence of the *Clermont*, removing the globe (which is visible in the sketch immediately behind Fulton), and adjusting slightly Fulton's posture and attire. But the most intriguing difference between the sketch and the final fresco concerns the subject of the painting resting on Fulton's easel. In the sketch it is an unfinished Fulton self-portrait; in the fresco, as noted above, it is an incomplete version of a late self-portrait by Benjamin West.

Provenance reveals that the original West painting was sold by the H.N. Barlow Gallery of Washington, D.C., to the Joint Committee on the Library on January 8, 1876. It probably hung somewhere in the Capitol until 1917 when it was transferred to the National Gallery of Art, later named the National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum). In 1897 it was recorded hanging in the room then occupied by the Senate Committee on the Library.<sup>13</sup> Congress's acquisition of the West self-portrait raises the possibility that the portrait may have been in the Capitol prior to its purchase in 1876. If so, its presence may have inspired the change in Brumidi's fresco of Fulton, which was painted in 1873 and is fully documented in a payment voucher dated November 28, 1873.<sup>14</sup>

In any case, Brumidi most likely inserted the West self-portrait in order to acknowledge Fulton's artistic debt to the older expatriate American painter.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the painting is an incomplete copy, presumably begun and then abandoned by Fulton himself, highlights the seminal shift in Fulton's career, his conversion from struggling young artist to distinguished inventor.

Nearly from the moment Brumidi first set foot in America as an Italian expatriate—landing in New York City in 1852—and throughout the twenty-five years he spent decorating the U.S. Capitol (1855–80), progress, technological innovation, and manifest destiny were recurrent themes in his work. Characteristically, Brumidi often blended his knowledge of mythology, allegory, and Renaissance-based motifs, fundamental elements of his classical training in Italy, with a personal fascination for the modern tools of American technology. A typical example is *Progress* (fig. 7), Brumidi's "earliest documented domestic mural," painted in 1853 for the Bennitt family house in South Hampton, Long Island. Here, a figure representing American progress rides on a dolphin while cherubs to either side carry the "symbols of commerce and liberty."<sup>16</sup> Despite the presence of a steamship and locomotive in the background and various attributes symbolic of America such as the native headdress and star worn by the figure, Brumidi clearly adapted his iconography from such well-known Renaissance precedents as Raphael's *Galatea*, 1513, from the Villa Farnesina in Rome. At the same time, Brumidi's theme, American commercial development, also ties his painting to such landmark contemporary





Fig. 7. Constantino Brumidi, *Progress*, 1853. Oil on canvas, *Architect of the Capitol*, donated through the United States Capitol Historical Society by Howard and Sara Pratt, 1994.

American visualizations of progress and manifest destiny as Thomas Crawford's *Progress of Civilization*, 1853–63, for the Senate pediment of the Capitol, and George Inness's 1855 *Lackawanna Valley* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Brumidi's *Authority Consults the Written Law* (fig. 8), c. 1875, is one of the frescoed lunettes, like his *Robert Fulton*, for the Brumidi Corridors, but it depicts judicial rather than material progress. Painted to fill the space over the door to room S-131, used by the Senate Committee on the Revision of Laws, the fresco's composition—a female Authority seated before a niche and flanked on either side



Fig. 8. Constantino Brumidi, *Authority Consults the Written Law*, c. 1875. Fresco, over the door to Senate Room 131, United States Capitol.

by standing figures representing Justice and Judgment—is based on Venetian Renaissance prototypes,<sup>17</sup> such as Giovanni Bellini's *San Giobbe Altarpiece*, c. 1490. Bellini's altarpiece, a type known as a “sacred conversation,” brought together the Madonna and Christ child and various saints to discuss aspects of Christian dogma. Brumidi's use of this particular format as a source for *Authority* reveals the ethical underpinnings of America's adherence to the rule of law.

Two final examples from the decorations for the Capitol that reflect Brumidi's melding of traditional allegory and modern technology are *Telegraph* (fig. 9) and *Physics* (fig. 10), two ceiling frescoes completed in 1867 for room S-211. The choice of the subject for *Telegraph* was probably related to the function of room S-211 as the Senate Post Office.<sup>18</sup> The fresco shows Europa, astride a bull and posed in a manner that recalls Titian's famous *Rape of Europa*, c. 1575–80, shaking hands with America, while a cherub holds the transatlantic cable laid between the two continents in 1866.



Fig. 9. Constantino Brumidi, *Telegraph*, 1867. Fresco, ceiling of Senate Room 211, the Lyndon B. Johnson Room (originally Senate Post Office), United States Capitol.



Fig. 10. Constantino Brumidi, *Physics*, 1867. Fresco, ceiling of Senate Room 211, the Lyndon B. Johnson Room (originally Senate Post Office), United States Capitol.



In *Physics*, Brumidi shows how science was “applied to creating new modes of transportation.” Physics, yet another female personification, sits at center carefully examining a chart.<sup>19</sup> A steamboat and steam locomotive, as in Brumidi’s earlier painting of *Progress*, occupy the middle distance. Brumidi presents his figure of Physics in the traditional pose of melancholy, head supported by her right arm and hand with her elbow resting on the pedestal. Brumidi used this pose to evoke the intense level of introspection often associated with focused and sustained study.<sup>20</sup>

The absence of a similar dependence on traditional allegory and Renaissance formulas for the depiction of modern American technological achievement is a distinguishing feature of Brumidi’s historical portrait of Robert Fulton and probably reflects the Italian artist’s response to long-voiced criticisms from Members of Congress and the press that much of his imagery was too foreign-looking and therefore not authentically American; the same charge, incidentally, was frequently aimed at Italianate American sculptors of the time.

In May 1859, President James Buchanan appointed the United States Art Commission to advise him and Congress on the completion of the decorative program for the Capitol. In their report, issued the following year, the commission was particularly critical of the un-American subjects decorating the Capitol: “It is not enough that the artist select an American subject for his work. He must also be imbued with a high sense of the nature of the institutions of the country, and should have a certain assimilation with its habits and manners.”<sup>21</sup>

With respect to his portrayal of Fulton, Brumidi apparently took these criticisms to heart, for he turned to a tradition of portraiture embedded in late eighteenth-century American republican ideology and visual sources more in tune with mid-nineteenth-century American sensibilities.

The most direct sources for Brumidi’s *Robert Fulton* are late eighteenth-century American portraits of men of science, a portrait type that consciously linked naturalists, physicians, and inventors to the contemplative life of the scholar and the intellectual as well as to the social and cultural pursuits associated with the gentleman and American polite society. Although these portraits sought to define the scientific identities of the sitters, endeavor, accomplishment, and ambition were emphasized by surrounding the subject with the books, models, tools, apparatus, and/or instruments of his trade, and by incorporating extended visual references to his specific inventions or discoveries.<sup>22</sup>

According to Brandon Brame Fortune, author of *Franklin and His Friends: Portraying the Man of Science in*

*Eighteenth-Century America* (1999), with the acquisition of national independence, a desire arose in the country to demonstrate individual American achievement, especially in military and political affairs. And, in spite of a relative lack of support in the new nation for cultural and intellectual pursuits, inventors, artists, and men of science joined the roster of American worthies. “The elevation of the men of science to the role of national exemplar,” writes Fortune, “was also a product of the importance given to Enlightenment science and the connection some men found between liberty, civic virtue, and the fostering of scientific truth.”<sup>23</sup>

A characteristic example of this portrait type and a painting that almost certainly influenced Brumidi’s frescoed lunette for the Patent Corridor is Benjamin West’s 1806 portrait of Fulton (fig. 11). Soon after completing the painting West gave it to Fulton, who brought it back with him when he returned to America in October 1806. The work eventually entered the collection of the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown. Brumidi could have easily found the image since several copies were made and an engraved version served as frontispiece for Cadwallader D. Colden’s *Life of Fulton* published in 1817.<sup>24</sup> Brumidi’s and West’s paintings depict Fulton comfortably seated before dramatic red draperies, which



Fig. 11. Benjamin West, Robert Fulton, 1806. Oil on canvas, Fenimore Art Museum, New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown.



open at the left to reveal a successful display of some new naval technology recently devised by the proud inventor. Where Brumidi depicts the steamship *Clermont*, the scene in West's portrait records the effective use of Fulton's torpedoes to blow up a ship, a demonstration that took place at Walmer Roads, near Deal, England, on October 15, 1805.<sup>25</sup>

The two most celebrated American scientists of the late eighteenth-century were Benjamin Franklin and David Rittenhouse, the first two presidents of the American Philosophical Society.<sup>26</sup> Shown here are portraits of Franklin and Rittenhouse (figs. 12 and 13), dated 1789 and 1796 respectively, by Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827), himself an educated man of science as well as an accomplished artist. The Franklin portrait is at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; the Rittenhouse is in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. In Peale's two paintings, the main features of this portrait type in terms of setting, pose, attributes, and so on, are again evident. In his portrait of Franklin, Peale emphasizes Franklin's experiments with electricity and his invention of the lightning rod, one of which he holds in his hand. The nocturnal view through the window shows lightning bolts hitting several brick buildings. Rittenhouse's reputation as an astronomer of great mechanical genius is referred to by the inclusion of a reflecting telescope.

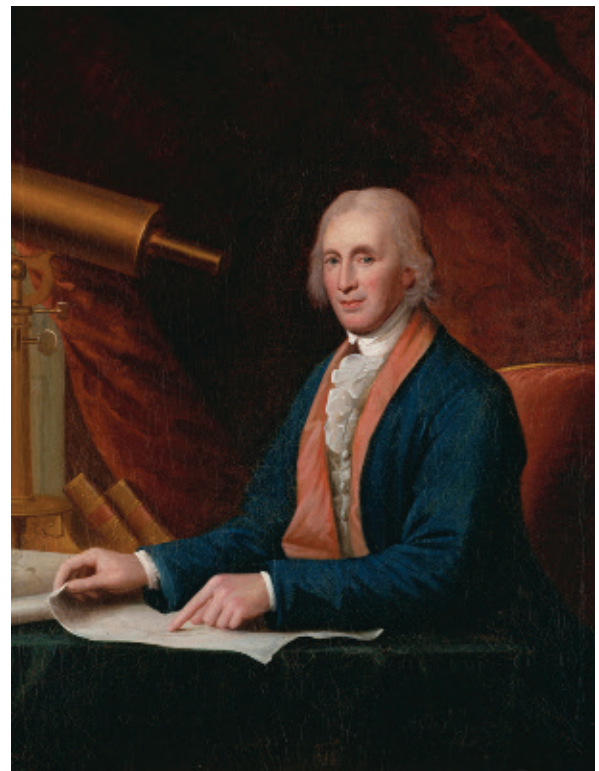
Some of the interest in American men of science, notes Brandon Fortune, grew out of a national desire to defend "the new republic against accusations . . . that Americans could not equal, much less surpass, European achievements" and "to persuade viewers that European culture was," indeed, "moving westward."<sup>28</sup> Consistent with these attitudes was the fact that late eighteenth-century American portraits of men of science had clear precedents in contemporary European *portraits d'apparat*, such as Jacques Louis David's *Portrait of Doctor Alphonse Leroy*, 1783, at Musée Fabre, Montpellier, and *Portrait of Antoine-Laurent and Marie-Anne Lavoisier*, 1788, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, the social and cultural prestige bestowed upon the subjects of these paintings, both American and European, came in part through historical association with Renaissance images of scholars in their studies, especially learned saints such as St. Jerome. Typical Renaissance depictions of "St. Jerome in His Study" include versions by Jan Van Eyck, dated 1432–41, and Domenico Ghirlandaio, dated 1480. In both portraits St. Jerome sits at a built-in desk in the studious pose of melancholy, flanked by curtains pulled aside to reveal books, manuscripts, and other emblems of learning reflecting his scriptural authority as



HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Fig. 12 Charles Willson Peale, Benjamin Franklin, 1789. Oil on canvas, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.



SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Fig. 13. Charles Willson Peale, David Rittenhouse, 1796. Oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., bequest of Stanley P. Sax.