



CHAPTER 9

Painting The Apotheosis of Washington

Constantino Brumidi's masterpiece is *The Apotheosis of Washington* on the 4,664-square-foot canopy over the eye of the dome, 180 feet above the floor of the Rotunda (fig. 9-1). Brumidi met the challenge of designing the centerpiece of the nation's Capitol and of creating a scene that could be read clearly from the floor but would also be effective when viewed from the balcony immediately below. Brumidi's commission to paint the canopy was complicated by changes of those in authority and by politics. His battle with governmental red tape must have seemed endless, and, in fact, the final payment was made to his heirs after his death.

After his dismissal in 1859, Meigs returned briefly to the Capitol in 1861 to resume charge of the decoration, and he re-hired Emmerich Carstens as foreman of ornamental painting.¹ Even though work on the Capitol was suspended in May 1861 because of the outbreak of the Civil War, Brumidi was able to continue his mural work, even during the period from May to October, when troops camped in the Capitol (fig. 9-2). We

Fig. 9-1. Central group of *The Apotheosis of Washington*. *The first president rises to the heavens, flanked by Liberty and Victory/Fame, encircled with maidens, and with a rainbow beneath his feet. Rotunda.*



Fig. 9-2. Union troops on the East Front of the Capitol with the dome under construction, May 1861. *Brumidi worked at the Capitol throughout the Civil War.*

have no record of his personal reaction to the war or to the soldiers, who despoiled the Capitol. Senator Solomon Foot, Chairman of Public Buildings, found a way to keep Brumidi working by paying him out of the contingent fund of the Senate, and he authorized him to “repair damage to the fresco throughout the North wing of the Capitol.”² Assisting him were Peruchi, Odense, and Long.

In April 1862, jurisdiction over the construction of the Capitol moved from the War Department to the Interior Department (at Walter's instigation) and construction resumed under Walter's direction, with the Commissioner of Public Buildings as disbursing agent. Brumidi's dealings were thus directly with Walter until the architect resigned in 1865. Meigs, however, continued his interest in the Capitol and wrote a strong letter of recommendation for Brumidi to Secretary of the Interior Caleb B. Smith, defending Brumidi's employment in preference to American painters because of his experience and skill in mural decoration.³ Although the issue was raised, no one was able to disprove that Brumidi's qualifications to paint the canopy were superior.

On August 18, 1862, Walter wrote to Brumidi, asking him to furnish a design for “a picture 65 feet in diameter, painted in fresco, on the concave canopy over the eye of the New Dome of the U.S. Capitol.”⁴ Walter encouraged

Brumidi to study the drawings in his office of the Rotunda, as redesigned in 1859 with a canopy over the eye of the dome (fig. 9–3). This suggests that Brumidi’s design for the canopy was not yet fully developed and that he added the watercolor image of his final canopy design over a tentative sketch on Walter’s drawing at this time. Walter may have envisioned an apotheosis of Washington similar to the Apotheosis of St. Genevieve at the Panthéon in Paris. On September 8, Brumidi described the final design to Walter: “The six groups around the border represent as you will see, War, Science, Marine, Commerce, Manufactures, and Agriculture. The leading figures will measure [*sic*] some 16 feet. In the centre is an Apotheosis of Washington, surrounded by allegorical figures, and the 13 original Sister States.”⁵ (The allegorical groups are shown at the end of this chapter; the title of the group “Manufactures” was changed to “Mechanics.”)

The concept of apotheosis, the raising of a person to the rank of a god or the glorification of the person as ideal, would have been familiar to Brumidi from classical art as well as from the numerous earlier paintings or prints depicting the apotheosis of the first president, who was honored as a national icon. For example, Rembrandt Peale’s painting showing Washington perched on a cloud and being crowned with a wreath by a winged cupid, engraved in 1800, may have been known to Brumidi. Other artists were still painting Washington’s apotheosis at mid-century.⁶ Earlier, Brumidi had made oil sketches for two other versions of *The Apotheosis of Washington* (see chapter 10).

Brumidi estimated the cost of designing and executing the work at \$50,000. His design was approved by Walter and Commissioner of Public Buildings B. B. French, on the condition that he reduce the fee to \$40,000. By the end of December Brumidi agreed to their terms.⁷ Commissioner French had sent Brumidi’s design, presumably his large oil sketch (see fig. 10–5), to Secretary Smith for approval. French then authorized Brumidi’s employment on January 3, 1863, although an appropriation was still pending, so that he could begin work as soon as possible. He was convinced that there was “no artist in the United States, capable of executing a real fresco painting as it should be done, especially so important a work as the one in contemplation, except Mr. Brumidi, and, as we know from experience his excellence in that art, I do not see how we can do otherwise than employ him.” He wanted Brumidi to use the existing scaffolding and hoped he could start by December 1863.⁸ However, although the Statue of Freedom was erected then, only the exterior of the dome was constructed. The canopy could not be constructed until all the interior ironwork was finished, and therefore Brumidi was not actually able to begin painting until 1865.

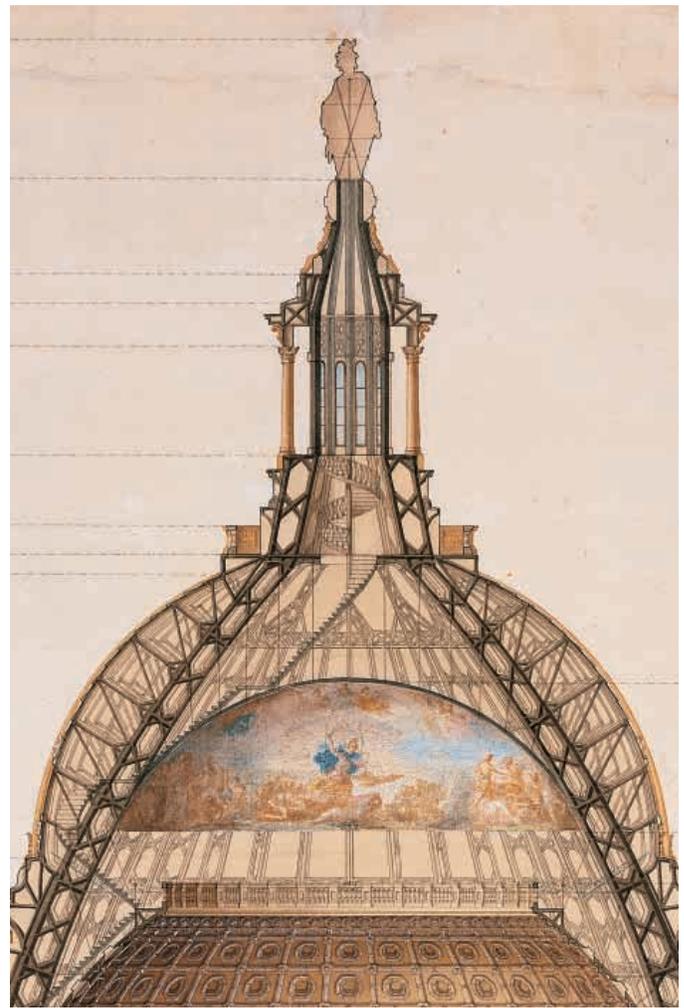


Fig. 9–3. Detail of Walter’s cross-section of the dome, 1859. Brumidi’s watercolor rendering of his final design for the Apotheosis was painted into Walter’s drawing. Architect of the Capitol.

A letter from Walter to Brumidi of March 11, 1863, following the congressional appropriation to complete the dome, served as the artist’s contract to paint the fresco for \$40,000, to be paid in monthly installments of \$2,000—almost as much as he normally earned in an entire year (fig. 9–4). The contract price was double the total wages of \$19,483.51 he had earned at the Capitol between 1855 and 1864. Even considering that Brumidi paid for supplies and any assistants out of this amount, he himself earned an enormous sum. However, he apparently did not manage his income well, perhaps having made bad investments, for when payments were halted in August 1865, with the final \$10,000 reserved pending final approval of his work, he needed to borrow money from Walter and others.⁹

Before he could fulfill his contract Brumidi suffered a series of bureaucratic frustrations and delays caused by the incomplete state of the dome construction. To help

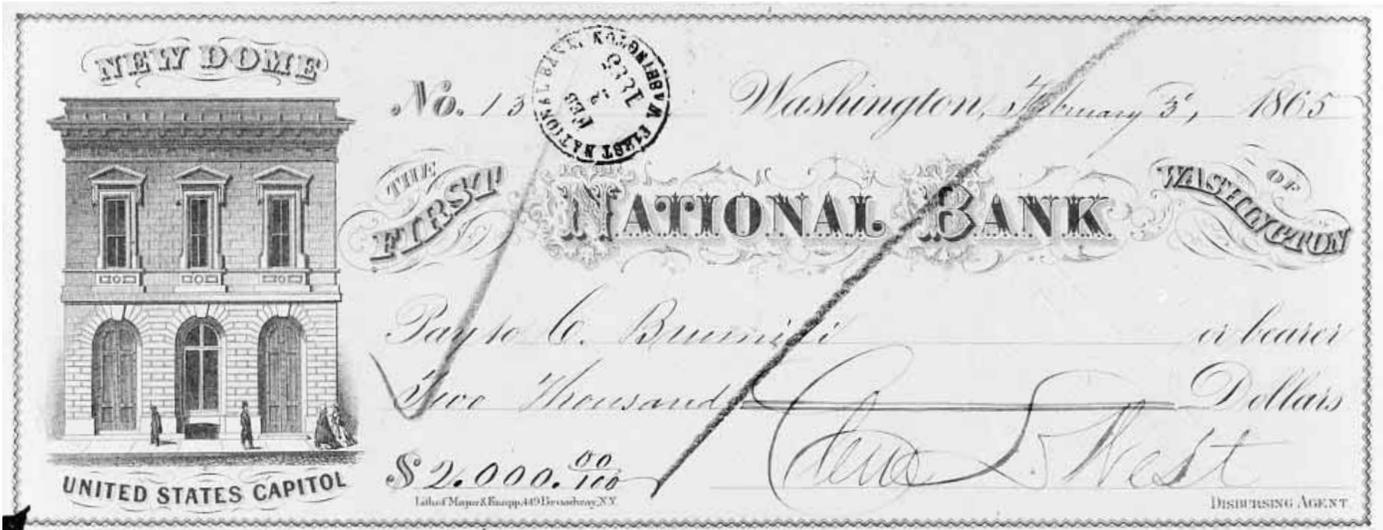


Fig. 9–4. Check cashed by Brumidi. The \$2,000 check was the first installment of the \$40,000 contract for painting the fresco. Architect of the Capitol.

Brumidi in preparing the full-size cartoons, Walter ordered a wooden structure simulating the canopy built for the artist; it was completed by the end of March 1863.¹⁰ This enabled him to judge the effect of the curved surface on the perspective and foreshortening of the figures. On May 2, 1863, the new Secretary of the Interior, J. P. Usher, questioned the contract with Brumidi and demanded a full report. Walter sent him copies of all the previous correspondence, supporting the project so strongly that he said he would resign if it were stopped. Despite Walter's reply, Usher ordered the work stopped on May 7. Finally, in July, Usher was convinced that the fresco was part of the original dome design approved by Congress and agreed that Brumidi could resume work. The artist received his first monthly payment in August. In November, after Brumidi had been paid \$10,000 for the preparation of the cartoons, Usher stopped further payments until Brumidi could begin the fresco.¹¹ Walter was afraid that the artist would "lose his spirit" and would be "too old to paint the picture before the place [was] ready for him." He also feared that the work might be stopped because Congress was getting impatient to see the Rotunda finished and the scaffolding removed.¹²

Finally, on December 3, 1864, after a year of waiting, the canopy was ready, and payments to Brumidi were resumed, including one for \$1,000 for work on the cartoons during October 1863.¹³ The speed of Brumidi's work, once he was allowed to begin painting, is remarkable, for he spent no more than eleven months filling the 4,664-square-foot surface of the canopy. Brumidi was assisted with the mortaring by government employee Joseph Beckert.¹⁴ For preparing his materials and perhaps

painting in the backgrounds, he would most likely have used his team of Peruchi, Odense, and Long. In any case, throughout the huge fresco the style and technique appear to be Brumidi's.

The Capitol's designers had always intended to commemorate the nation's first president in the center of the building. Brumidi permanently put an image of Washington in this place of honor, after Horatio Greenough's monumental Zeus-like, toga-clad statue of George Washington (fig. 9–5), commissioned for the center of the Rotunda, had been moved from the Rotunda to the Capitol grounds in 1844. Brumidi seems to have consciously created a variation on Greenough's pose of a seated figure with the right arm outstretched and the left hand holding a sword. But he clothed Washington in his military uniform and gave him a lavender lap robe to create the effect of classical drapery (fig. 9–6). He flanked Washington with figures representing Liberty, holding the fasces, and a combination of Victory and Fame sounding a trumpet, which may allude to Antonio Capellano's relief over the entrance to the Rotunda (fig. 9–7). The thirteen encircling figures, each with a star above her head, may symbolize specific states by regions; those near Liberty, with cotton boll wreaths, clearly suggest the South.¹⁵

Brumidi was painting the canopy during a tumultuous period in the nation's history—a single month, April 1865, saw both the surrender of General Lee and the assassination of President Lincoln. At this time, he had finished the center group and was working on the scene below, "War" (fig. 9–8). Brumidi may have expressed his own political feelings by using



Fig. 9-5. Horatio Greenough's *George Washington on the Capitol grounds*. In the canopy, Brumidi paid tribute to the familiar monument while varying the pose and costume. The statue is now in the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig. 9-6. Central group of Washington with Liberty and Victory/Fame. Washington is placed near the center of the Rotunda, looking toward the entrance on the east. Rotunda.



Fig. 9-7. Antonio Capellano, *Fame and Peace Crowning George Washington*. This 1827 relief may have inspired Brumidi to flank his Washington with winged allegorical figures, one of whom bears the trumpet of fame and palm of victory. East central portico.



Fig. 9–8. Figures trampled by Freedom in “War,” the first lower group painted. *After finishing the central figures, Brumidi moved to this scene. Rotunda.*

the features of the Confederate leaders on the evil figures being vanquished by Freedom: Jefferson Davis as Discord, with two lighted torches, and Alexander H. Stephens as Anger, being struck by a thunder bolt and biting his finger. It is possible to imagine other faces as portraits as well; Brumidi was certainly familiar with the Renaissance tradition of depicting historic or allegorical figures with the features of the artist’s notable contemporaries.¹⁶

By May the painter was starting on the scene to the left of “War,” entitled “Science.” At the end of the month, Walter resigned, and completion of Brumidi’s contract was overseen by Walter’s longtime assistant Edward Clark, who was appointed in his place in August 1865 (fig. 9–9). The artist was forced to stop work in July because the appropriation was exhausted. The new secretary of the interior, James Harlan, resumed payments to Brumidi only after inspecting the fresco in July.

Brumidi had to make an unexpected change in the fresco; only days after his appointment on August 30, 1865, Clark received a letter from Meigs, insisting that Brumidi remove the portrait of him in his blue uniform included in the Commerce group; Brumidi

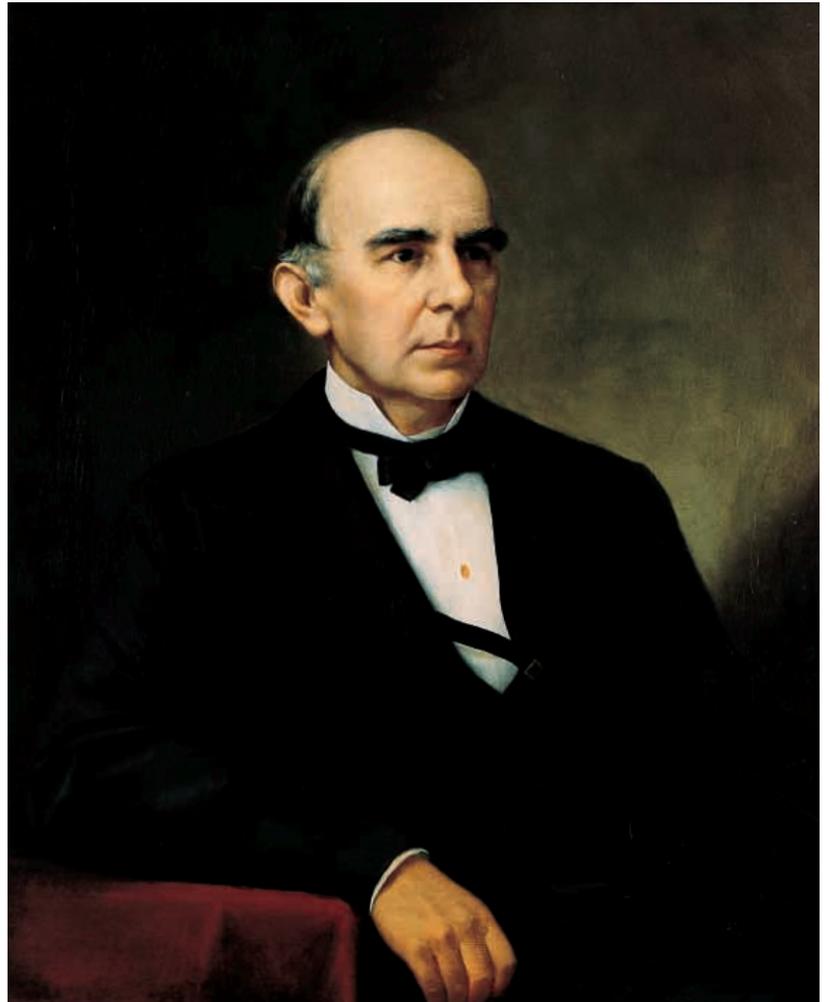


Fig. 9–9. *Edward Clark.* Brumidi painted this portrait sometime after Clark was appointed the Architect of the Capitol in 1865, based on a photograph preserved in the Lola Germon Brumidi Family Album. Architect of the Capitol.

complied, but the patch of mortar in the shape of Meigs's scraped-out head and shoulders is still visible (figs. 9–10 and 9–11).¹⁷ Meigs, proud of his integrity and his reputa-

tion for honesty in handling the construction funds, may have been disturbed by being depicted with Mercury thrusting a bag of money towards him. Ironically, Bru-

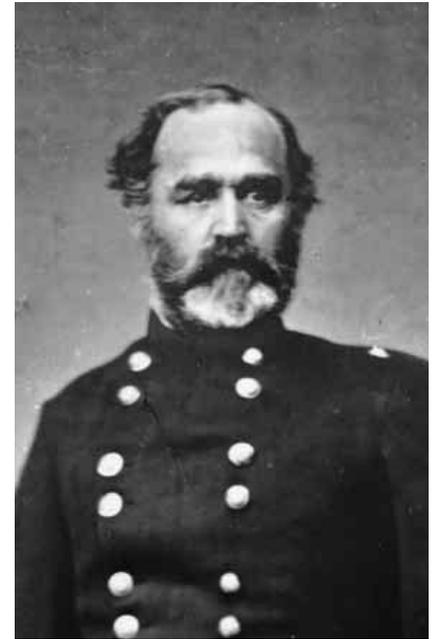


Fig. 9–10. Location of Montgomery C. Meigs's scraped-out image. *Meigs insisted that Brumidi remove his portrait, which was between the two remaining figures, from the "Commerce" group. Rotunda.*

Fig. 9–11. Photograph of Montgomery C. Meigs. *This image of the engineer in uniform was evidently the basis of Brumidi's depiction in the canopy.*



Fig. 9–12. Thomas U. Walter as Samuel F. B. Morse. *In the Renaissance tradition, the white-bearded figure in the "Science" group represents the inventor of the telegraph but has the features of Walter. Rotunda.*

Fig. 9–13. Photograph of Thomas U. Walter. *This photograph closely resembles Brumidi's portrait of Morse. Library of Congress.*

midi's tribute to Meigs's rival, Walter, is preserved in the features used for Samuel F. B. Morse (fig. 9–12 and 9–13).

By September 1865, Brumidi had completed all but the last scene, "Marine," and he was being pressured by Clark to complete the painting of the canopy. The artist, however, wanted to review his work after the plaster was completely dry. Realizing that he was going to need to "cover the connections of the pieces of plaster . . . giving more union to the colors at the said junctions, for obtain [*sic*] the artistic effect . . .," he thought it best to wait until the spring, when the weather was less damp, for this last step. He also asked for the gas lights to be turned on, so that he could judge the fresco in the light in which it would be seen.¹⁸ He therefore requested that the scaffold be left in place. Walter, who was still involved in the project after his resignation, went up into the dome to see the picture and complimented Brumidi: "I think it will be perfect when seen from below."¹⁹

Despite the artist's pleas the scaffolding was taken down in early January. His masterpiece received high praise; B. B. French commented, "That picture, as a work of art, surpasses any one in the world, of the kind."²⁰ The *National Intelligencer* published a strongly positive review of it on January 17: "The general effect is inspiring, while the details bear close inspection and command admiration. It is almost a difficulty to realize that some of the sitting or reclining figures are not things of life . . . we do not hesitate to say that both in design and execution it is worthy of the Capitol and the nation."²¹

Meigs, now a general, came to see the canopy, and he wrote to the artist:

I find the drawing and coloring most agreeable and beautiful. The perspective is so well managed that I doubt whether anyone not well acquainted with the construction of such edifices as the Dome could determine by the mere use of his eyes the form and position of the surface which is painted. The figures appear to take their places in space with the illusion of a diorama. I am glad the country at length possesses a Cupola on whose vault is painted a fresco picture after the manner of the great edifices of the old world. I regret that the joinings of the plaster still show too plainly in the clear graduated tints of the sky the progress of each days work, but these, I trust, will disappear as the picture dries more completely.²²

Unfortunately, the joins between the *giornate* remained clearly visible from below.

Walter also praised the work: "As to the merits of the painting I have come to the conclusion that it is a decided success." After commenting on the skill with which Bru-

midi had overcome the difficulties of the concave surface, he continued:

The coloring is not as brilliant as I expected it would be but it is evident that its atmospheric effect would not have been so good if the coloring had been stronger.—Upon the whole I am well pleased with the picture;—it is far better than the great painting by Gross [*sic*] in the eye of the Dome of the Pantheon at Paris, for which he was created a Baron, and received 100.000 francs. The latter picture is 170 feet above the floor, while that of the Capitol is ten feet higher and contains one third more surface. I studied this picture well when I was in Paris, and from it I derived the idea of the one we have in the Capitol. Our picture wants more light in the day-time. I intended to have 36 large reflectors around it so as to throw a flood of light on it from the outside upper windows; if these are introduced I think the chiaroscuro will be perfect.²³

The reflecting mirrors were eventually installed, so Brumidi's masterpiece was well lighted both day and night (fig. 9–14).

In 1866, a booklet was published containing a description of the canopy and its symbolism by S. D. Wyeth and a photograph of Brumidi's oil sketch copyrighted by the artist. The booklet was sold in the Capitol for an unknown period and provides the only detailed explanation of the identification of the figures; because of its date, it can be assumed the descriptions came directly from the artist. Wyeth also quoted an anonymous art critic: "whether considered as regards the conceptions of the artist, the perfection of coloring and drawing, the faultless grouping, or the peculiar characteristics that adapt it to the concave surface on which it is painted, and to the great distance from which it must be viewed, the picture is a master piece of art."²⁴

The bureaucratic obstacles did not end for Brumidi even after the completion and favorable reception of the fresco. First came the question of who was to approve the work. After many letters back and forth over a two-month period between architect Edward Clark, the secretary of the interior, and the Joint Committee on the Library (which was in charge of the art in the Capitol), and a supporting letter from Walter, Brumidi was finally paid \$9,500, with \$500 "retained until picture is properly toned and blended," for a total of \$39,500.²⁵ Finally, thirteen years later, in February 1879, \$700 was appropriated for blending the joints and building a scaffold, but the structure was never erected. After Brumidi's death in 1880, Congress gave Brumidi's children the remaining \$500 owed to him.



Fig. 9–14. Early photograph from the balcony. This photograph of “Marine” shows how the space under the canopy perimeter was left open, so that light could be reflected onto the fresco from the windows in the dome. The balcony was enclosed when the Rotunda was air conditioned in the 1940s. Brady-Handy Collection, Library of Congress.

Brumidi’s crowning achievement remains the focal point of the Rotunda and the apex of the interior of the Capitol. Brumidi’s canopy rivals the grand illusionistic ceilings and domes of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, such as Correggio’s *Assumption of the Virgin* in the dome of Parma cathedral, Luca Giordano’s *Apotheosis of the Medici Dynasty* in Florence, or Rubens’s *Apotheosis of James II*. In these works, figures at the perimeter appear anchored to the ground while the saint or person being glorified rises on clouds to heaven. Similarly, Brumidi created the illusion that George Washington is rising through the clouds and the golden sky, as if the Rotunda were open to the heavens (fig. 9–15). In combining allusions to classical mythology and Renaissance and Baroque effects with references to American history and the technical achievements of his day, he had created a unique synthesis.

Conservation completed in 1988 has made its full effect visible again to millions of visitors each year (figs. 9–16 through 9–21).

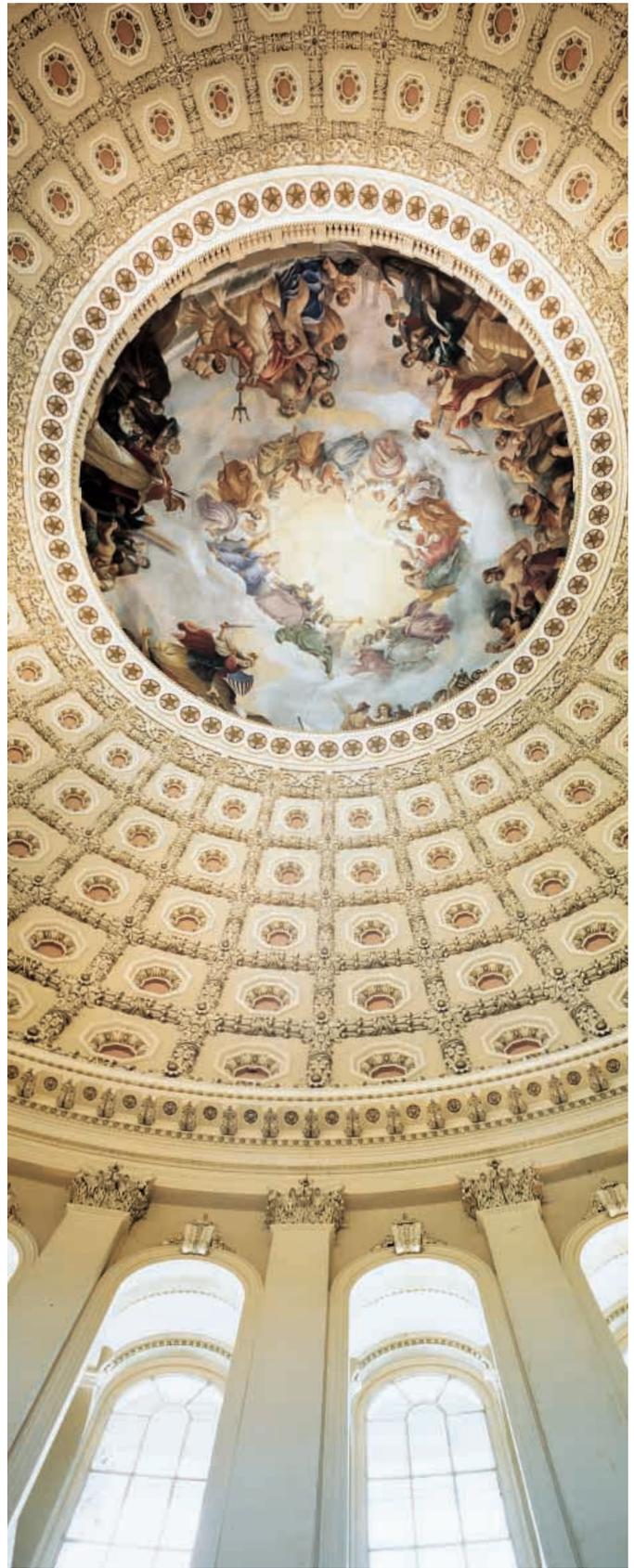


Fig. 9–15. View of the canopy in the eye of the dome. Brumidi’s fresco gives the impression that the first president is rising to the heavens. Rotunda.



Fig. 9-16. “War.” *Armored Freedom, sword raised and cape flying, with a helmet and striped shield reminiscent of those on the Statue of Freedom, tramples Tyranny and Kingly Power, assisted by a fierce eagle carrying arrows and a thunderbolt. Rotunda.*



Fig. 9-17. "Agriculture." Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, is shown with a wreath of wheat and a cornucopia, seated on a McCormick reaper. Young America in a liberty cap holds the reins of the horses, while Flora gathers flowers in the foreground. Rotunda.



Fig. 9–18. “Mechanics.” *Vulcan, god of the forge, stands at his anvil with his foot on a cannon, near a pile of cannon balls and with a steam engine in the background. The man at the forge is thought to represent Charles Thomas, who was in charge of the ironwork of the dome. Rotunda.*



Fig. 9-19. "Commerce." Mercury, god of commerce, with his winged cap and sandals and caduceus, hands a bag of gold to Robert Morris, financier of the Revolutionary War, while men move a box on a dolly. The anchor and sailors lead into the next scene. Brumidi signed and dated the canopy on the box below Mercury. Rotunda.



Fig. 9-20. "Marine." Neptune, god of the sea, holding his trident and crowned with seaweed, rides in a shell chariot drawn by sea horses. Venus, goddess of love born from the sea, helps lay the transatlantic cable. In the background is a form of iron-clad ship with smokestacks. Rotunda.



Fig. 9-21. "Science." *Minerva, goddess of wisdom and the arts of civilization, with helmet and spear, points to an electric generator creating power stored in batteries, next to a printing press, while inventors Benjamin Franklin, Samuel F.B. Morse, and Robert Fulton watch. At the left, a teacher demonstrates the use of dividers. Rotunda.*

Notes to Chapter 9

1. Oath of Office, March 9, 1861, AOC/EXT.
2. CB to MCM, June 3, 1861, AOC/CO.
3. MCM to Caleb B. Smith, June 5, 1862, NARA/RG 48 series 291, box 4.
4. TUV to CB, Aug. 18, 1862, AOC/LC.
5. CB to TUV, Sept. 8, 1862, copy of original letter in TUV Papers, LC. Clerk's copy (with height miscopied as 15 feet) in AOC/LB. During the conservation of the frescoes, Minerva, one of the tallest figures, was measured as over 15 feet in height.
6. Mark Edward Thistlethwaite, *The Image of George Washington: Studies in Mid-nineteenth-century American History Painting* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979), pp. 190–192 and Phoebe Lloyd Jacobs, "John James Bancroft and the Apotheosis of Washington," *Winchester Portfolio*, 1977, pp. 115–135.
7. TUV to CB, Dec. 24, 1862, AOC/LB. CB to TUV Dec. 27, 1862, TUV Papers, LC.
8. BBF to TUV, January 3, 1863, TUV Papers, LC, and AOC/LB.
9. TUV to CB, March 11, 1863, AOC/LB; TUV to CB, September 5, 1865, TUV/PA (AAA reel 4142).
10. TUV to CB, February 25, 1863, and March 30, 1863, TUV/PA (AAA reel 4141).
11. J. P. Usher to BBF, May 2, 1863, NARA/RG 48, Series 295, Register, pp. 26-27. BBF to Usher, May 4, 1863, AOC/LB. TUV to Amanda Walter, May 4, 1863, TUV/PA (AAA, reel 4141). Usher to BBF, July 7, 1863, AOC/CO, and TUV to CB, July 8, 1863, TUV/PA (AAA, reel 4141). Usher to West, November 6, 1863, AOC/CO.
12. TUV to Charles Fowler, Dec. 21, 1863, AOC/TUV Letter Book; TUV to Edward R. James, Feb. 12, 1864, and TUV to Fowler, April 4, 1864, TUV/PA (AAA, reel 4141.)
13. TUV to Usher, Dec. 3, 1864, NARA/RG 48, series 291, box 2, and AOC/ Voucher Book, Works of Art, v. 1.
14. S. D. Wyeth, "Description of Brumidi's Allegorical Painting," pamphlet excerpted from *The Federal City* (Washington: Gibson Brothers Printers, 1866), p. 116
15. *Ibid.*, p.112.
16. George Hazleton, *The National Capitol* (New York: J. F. Taylor and Company, 1897), pp. 97-98, reports that Brumidi was accused of portraying, on the left, John B. Floyd and Robert E. Lee, and to the right, Jefferson Davis and Alexander H. Stephens, but states that he believes this unlikely. The white-bearded man looks like John Brown as the latter appears in historic photographs, but this may be only a coincidence.
17. September 3, 1865, MCM Pocket Diary, MCM Papers, LC.
18. CB to EC, September 19, 1865, AOC/CO. The situation was reported by Clark, *Annual Report of Edward Clark, Architect of the Capitol Extension*, November 1, 1865, 39–1, House Ex. Doc. No. 1, p. 811.
19. TUV to CB, November 21, 1865, TUV/PA (AAA, reel 4142.)
20. Benjamin Brown French, *Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee's Journals, 1828-1870*, Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough, eds. (Hanover, N.H., and London: University Press of New England, 1989), pp. 497–498.
21. *National Intelligencer*, January 17, 1866, p. 2.
22. MCM to CB, January 19, 1866, NARA/RG 48, series 290.
23. TUV to BBF from Germantown, February 17, 1866, TUV/ PA (AAA, reel 4142.) In this letter TUV states that the photographs were taken by Mr. Walker.
24. Wyeth, "Description of Brumidi's Allegorical Painting," pp. 112–115.
25. June 9, 1866, Voucher no. 23, AOC/Voucher Book, Works of Art, v. 1.