

APPENDIX A:

Brumidi's First Fresco

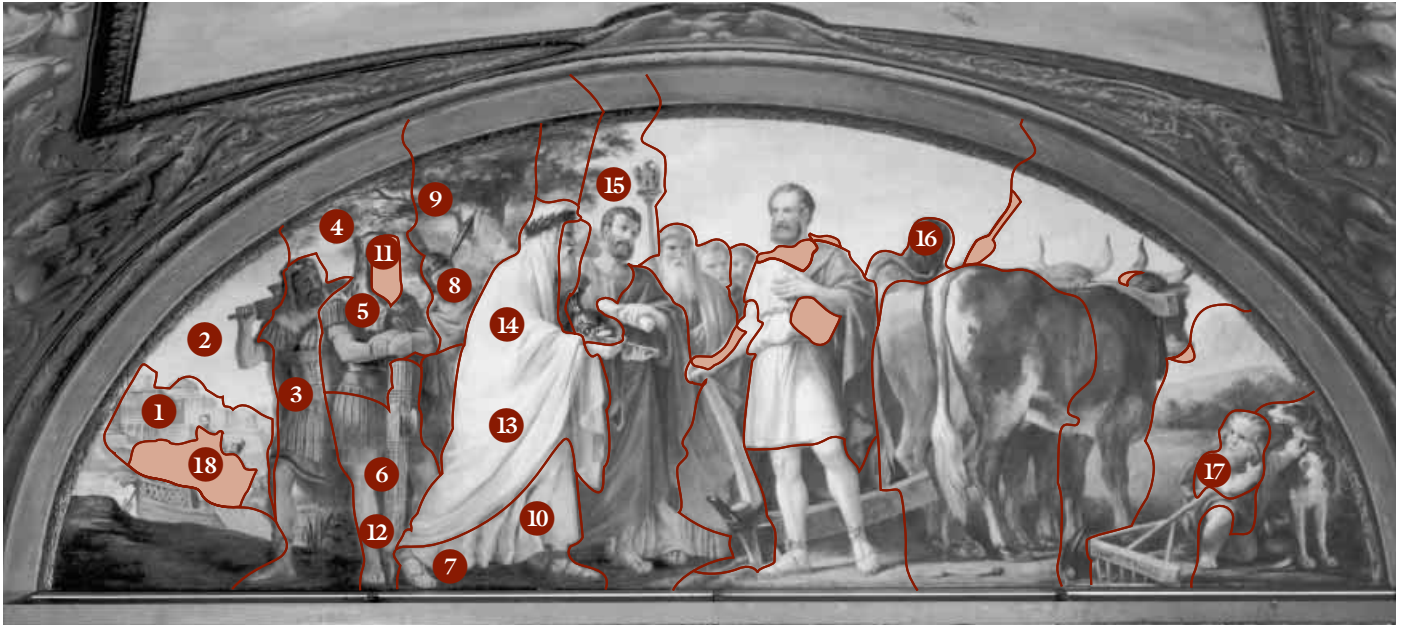


Fig. A-1. Diagram of *giornate* in *Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow*. Lines indicate divisions between the sections of mortar. The numbers indicate the order in which Brumidi painted the sections; they are keyed to the descriptions from Meigs's journal.

Patches indicating corrections
 Edges of *giornate*

Conservators' Introduction

BERNARD RABIN AND CONSTANCE S. SILVER

The description of Brumidi at work in the room for the House Committee on Agriculture (H-144), recently discovered in the transcription of Montgomery C. Meigs's private journal, appears to be unique in the history of art. Although there have been several "how-to" manuals that explain the step-by-step execution of a fresco, beginning with the Roman architect Vitruvius, Meigs's journal is the only known eye-witness description of a frescoist actually at work.

For the conservator, the transcriptions bring us close to the artist and make us feel a part of the creative process. Although some of the sections Brumidi chopped out and replaced were evident to us while cleaning the fresco, it

was very interesting to learn how many changes he made day by day. The journal entries suggest the conditions of cold and damp under which he had to work; in fact, there was even a danger of the plaster freezing.

Meigs's observations are borne out by what we found on the wall in the configuration of the *giornate* and in the way Brumidi built up his pigments as one would when using oil paint. We learn that Meigs was initially disturbed by how bright the blue was when first applied; Brumidi knew that it would dry to a lighter shade. The journal gives us a very rare account of the dynamic process of creating a fresco, which normally can only be studied as a *fait accompli*.

Excerpts from the Journals of Montgomery C. Meigs

The Journals are among the Papers of Montgomery C. Meigs, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. They were transcribed from archaic Pittman shorthand by William Mohr for the U.S. Senate Bicentennial Commission. These selections describe Meigs's introduction to Brumidi and the execution of the frescoed lunette of *Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow* in room H-144.

1854

Dec. 28 Mr. Stone stopped today to see me about an Italian painter named—I forget. He has been in Mexico lately, painting a church, is from Rome, which place, like all his countrymen, according to their own account, he left for political reasons. Mr. Stone said he had told him that I could not employ him without seeing anything of his work. And he had offered to paint a small piece if I would give him a room, a piece of fresh wall as a sample of what he could do. After some conversation carried on in bad French on both sides, I gave him the size and shape of the lunette filling the elliptical arch at one end of my office, and he promised to make and send to me a design for an allegorical painting of agriculture, supposing that the room might be occupied by the Committee on Agriculture at some future day. He spoke very confidently of his own skill, said there was no fresco painting in America, only tempera. He said he had a picture to paint for a church and another for a hotel. He said he would be here in March and paint his specimen, but I told him that the determination of these things rested with Congress and that the legislators went away in March, so that if he wished them to see his painting, he had better do it earlier. Upon this, he laughed and said that the church would be there always, Congress would pass, and he would paint this first. He is a lively old man with a very red nose, either from Mexican suns or French brandies. Is an *élève* [pupil] of some Roman academy, knows Crawford, the sculptor. Was employed with many other artists in the decoration of the house of the banker Toroni [Torlonia] in Rome, which he says is very splendid, painted in fresco. There was with him another man, a handsome young

man, either French or Italian, I did not understand which, who is a bronze worker. For him, I had nothing. He acted as interpreter for us whenever the painter failed to understand my bad French or I failed to comprehend his, which was about as bad.

1855

- Jan. 24 I received a visit also from the fresco painter, Brumidi, who brought his sketch in oil of Cincinnatus at the Plow. It is good and shows skill in drawing and composition and coloring, much greater than I expected. He is to begin it in fresco in about a week, taking a week to make his cartoons full-size.
- Jan. 30 I took Mr. Stone today through the workshops. The old gentleman was much interested. He said that I had done 10 years' work since I had been here. I took him to see the cartoon drawing by Mr. Brumidi. He is not much advanced, the cold weather interfering with his colors. He has taken a house on Delaware Avenue, within one square of the Capitol, for his work . . . I sent him today a marble slab to rub his colors upon, and sent a bucket of lime for his white, as the other, he says, froze.
- Feb. 12 I went also with Mr. Brumidi, the painter in fresco, to look at his cartoon, which he had finished. I did not think that he had carried out the promise of his sketch. He has not carefully enough studied the figures. They are carelessly drawn and are therefore out of drawing. His priest is too short for his head. One of his warriors is not standing correctly. And there are other faults in the picture more visible where it is drawn in black and white only than in the colored sketch which he worked from. I pointed out some defects, which he did not seem to be quite pleased at my doing. I told him that he would have many critics, as the American painters would all look with jealousy at him and at his works and that they would find all the fault they could.
- Feb. 14 Mr. Brumidi came today to make preparations for the painting of his fresco. The first operation is to wet thoroughly for several days the rough coat of plaster upon the wall. This was done twice today. He says that the common sand used in the mortar is as good as any for the final coat of plastering, or "intonaco." I

told Mr. McFarlane to prepare himself by getting the necessary tools to do the plastering for the painter as he goes on with his work.

The lime used in the last coat should be kept a long time in pots; so, soon as the weather gets favorable, I must have a large quantity slacked (slaked) and run into the cellars to be used in our decorated walls.

Feb. 19

Monday. Today Mr. Brumidi began his fresco of 'Cincinnatus Called from the Plow to be Dictator.' I made Mr. McFarlane, the master mason, do the plastering for him. This coat of lime and sand was laid upon a small part, perhaps a yard [square], in the lower left-hand corner of the picture. This was laid and smoothed by common mason's plastering trowel. Brumidi went over it with a broom and water till he got a somewhat roughened surface. The ground of this plaster was laid last summer, and as a hot stove has been burning, with the wind in the room this ground has got very dry. It was well floated when put on, so that the surfaces are quite true and have an advantage over many of the walls in Italy which have fine and indeed great works painted upon them.

After the coat of plaster was ready, Brumidi proceeded to mix his palette very deliberately. He used the common artist colors—terra di siena, umber, ochres, smalt, cobalt. These were all mixed with lime which has been slaked for some days into a paste. This lime, like all his other colors, are kept in pots of various sizes, placed for convenience in a wooden box of about 30" x 18" x 9". Water enough was mixed with that to leave some free water floating at the top of the pot. To make his palette, he takes a spatula and pours out of it every color he wished and pours the lime, mixed that upon a slab of marble to the tint he wanted. The color of the tint changes as it dries, an advantage of the effect. He had a brick upon which he dried his brush from time to time; and as that did not dry quick enough, he afterwards went out and brought in a lump of umber. The tint applied to this seemed, from its powerful absorptive quality, to sink in at once, and the change of color was quite remarkable. I was surprised to see him painting so deliberately and also to see him use his colors with so much impasto. He laid them on, it appeared to me, just as they are used in oil painting. The color did not

seem to sink in as quick as I had expected. I asked him if his sky was not going to be too blue, for he laid it in very thick with some blue, either smalt or cobalt. He said no, that he feared rather that it would prove too light, "troppo chiaro."

He began about 10 1/2 a.m. and continued to paint, with the interval during which he went home to dinner until I left the office at 4 p.m. I left him at work. The part of his picture which he was at work upon is a left-hand corner, which conveys a distant view of some building and the Tiber, with a boat in which the deputation has come to offer an insignia of the dictatorship to Cincinnatus. A man sits upon the stern of the boat, and a fine figure stands upon the gunwale. The sky, when I left it, was as intensely blue as it could well be made by cobalt. I shall look with interest to see the changes which drying will make in its color. The hand and forearm of the moving figure, with a bundle of fasces upon his shoulder, are in the part of the picture which he was painting upon. When I left him, he had merely put the first tint on this hand and arm, and I do not suppose that he touched that again; and he will therefore, I expect, scrape that all the while this morning.

Feb. 20

Brumidi finished yesterday the hand which I thought he would erase. Today he had the outline of the next figure, putting in upon the fresh plaster, or intonaco. He painted, however, only one of them, that to which the hand and arm done yesterday belonged. This figure has some force but is not an important figure in the composition, being in the background. The parts of the work done yesterday begin already to come out with much more force and clearness that they did at first, and they begin also to show spots of irregular color. This is owing to the unequal drying of the mortar. The dark blue sky looks a light cobalt, and the background figures are getting much more visible than they were. For tomorrow, he expects to make the bust and head and body of the next figure, the one leaning upon the fasces. I am surprised to see so much time spent upon the painting. He worked till sunset today without any inconvenience from drying of the intonaco. The work is gone over and over again with the same freedom of retouching and the same thickness of color that

- is used in oil painting. In fact, the process seemed to be precisely the same.
- Feb. 21 I found that Brumidi had finished the first lic-
tor yesterday, so that this morning he had a
piece of plaster put in for the next figure,
which is the second licitor. Of this, he only at-
tempted the upper half of the figure, with sky
and tree branches above it. This being more
in the front of the picture than the other, re-
quired a more careful finish, and he com-
pleted this part of the painting by sunset. The
work has much force, and the part begun
first, though now only 3 days old, already be-
gins to show much improvement in clearness
and beauty. The mortar seems to set very
hard, and it will make a durable wall, and the
picture will be as durable as the wall itself.
- Many visitors came in to look at the fresco
painter, among others Senator Douglas, who
came to look at the dome and to show it to a
friend. I told him of the painting, and he was
delighted to have the opportunity to explain
it to his friend, who had seen the frescoes of
Rome. He said he was very glad to see that I
was going to fresco the walls.
- Feb. 22 Washington's Birthday. A busy day for me.
Many visitors to look at the fresco painting
and the dome.
- The fresco painting gets on rapidly. I
found this morning that the lower part of
the figure of the second licitor was laid in
with the first tints when I reached the office.
This figure, I believe, was completed by sun-
set. I was too much occupied for the last few
hours of the day to look at it closely. He in-
cluded in the part he laid in a foot of the
priest. The work thus far looks very strong
and forcible.
- Feb. 23 Brumidi today undertook the tree and the
head and robe of the armed man in the back-
ground, between the priest and the licitor. He
said when I left the office at 4 p.m. that he
had undertaken too much and would be
obliged to content himself with the figure
and erase the tree at night, to be painted
again tomorrow.
- Feb. 24 Brumidi has now completed his fresco as far
as the priest in white and has made his right
foot and the lower part of his dress, which is
in shadow. He cut out today the face and part
of the 2nd licitor, which did not please him,
and repainted it. A drop or two of water also
had trickled in the plaster over the foot which
was finished yesterday, and he said he should
be obliged to cut that out and repaint it.
- Feb. 25 I have stayed at home today in consequence
of a cold, which has nearly deprived me of
the power to speak at all, caught in the office
because of the damp and cold while Brumidi
is painting his fresco.
- Feb. 27 The fresco begins to show itself much better
than it did. The figure of the licitor is coming
out in a striking manner. I found this morn-
ing that Brumidi had erased all that he
painted yesterday. He said that the intonaco
dried too fast for him and he did not get it
finished. He had painted the white robe of
the priest. He painted it all today above the
fold which runs from the right foot obliquely
up, leaving the shadow part below un-
painted. It is well done and looks already
very well.
- March 1 I had many visitors today to look at the dome
and at the fresco, both generally admired.
The figure of the priest is finished, and today
Brumidi put in the upper part of the Senator,
who points to Rome and appeals to Cincinna-
tus to come to the help of this country, with
the sky and background belonging to this fig-
ure. He painted this with more care than any
figure yet, and the head is put in with a deli-
cacy and beauty which has surprised me. It
looks like one of Sully's delicately painted
heads. The undergarment is finished, the left
hand and arm not yet begun. Brumidi said
today that after painting in oil for some time,
his hand was a little out and first thought he
would repaint some of the first parts of the
work. After he finishes, he will cut them out
and repaint them.
- March 7 [Congressman Richard H. Stanton] saw the
painting of Brumidi, which he has not seen
before; for although he has been into Mr.
Walter's room, he has not been into mine.
He was much delighted with it. Went up to
the scaffold.
- March 9 Brumidi has now got so far with his picture
that today he painted the driver of the oxen.
The greater part of the picture is thus finished.
- March 14 Mr. Brumidi has finished his picture, except
the head and bust of the boy in the corner.

- 17 He is waiting for this till I can take Monty as the model for it. Louisa asked him to put him in, and he said that he was a good model and he would make it a portrait. Today was so damp and dark that I did not like to take him to the place. Some little changes will be made in two parts of the picture which were painted first. It was 5 years since he had painted in fresco, and his hand was a little out of practice.
- March 15 I took Monty to the office today, and Mr. Brumidi used him as the model to paint the boy in the corner of his picture. He did not make a likeness but only a sketch which is a boy of Monty's character. This completes the picture, except some re-painting which he proposes to do in the first parts of it.
- 17
- March 16 Fresco painting is now completed, except that Mr. Brumidi today took out the landscape at the left which he painted the first day, and repainted it. As he began upon Monday, after he works upon the picture in making little repairs, tomorrow it will be just 4 weeks' work all together.
- 18
- March 17 Mr. Corcoran came with his daughter and another lady to look at the fresco painting today.
- March 20 I had this morning a visit from the Secretary of War. He went over the shops and looked at the work. He authorized me to offer to Mr. Brumidi \$8 per diem.
- March 30 I forgot to mention, by the way, in this book that Brumidi has made a sketch—"skitch," he calls it—for the ceiling of the room in which he has painted the Cincinnatus. He has made a beautiful division of the work and put into the 4 arches the 4 seasons. I think that it will make a very beautiful room when finished.
- April 2 I had a visit from Mr. Stanton, Dick, this morning. He came to take another look at the painting of Cincinnatus, which he professes to admire very highly.
- April 7 Miss Noah, with her brother, with some other persons in her train, came today to look at the fresco. I introduced her to Brumidi. Took her to see the dome drawing as it is now. We then went to Brumidi's painting room to look at the cartoons he is making for the ceiling of the committee room of agriculture.
- April 18 I went to see the work of Brumidi, and Casali, the former has made and finished the first of the half-size cartoons for the ceiling. He has one other nearly done and a third is begun. I do not think he works as fast as in the first picture.
- April 21 Brumidi is at work upon his cartoons.
- May 19 [President Pierce and Secretary Davis] had come in for a moment to see me and look at the picture.
- May 28 Mr. Huntington, the painter, came to see me and the Capitol. I took him over the work, showed him Brumidi's designs and cartoons, with which he was pleased.
- June 6 Mr. Brumidi announced his completion of the cartoons for the room, and I have ordered the scaffold to be put up for him tomorrow.
- June 11 The scaffold is up in my room for the purpose of painting the walls, but it seems that some of the plaster has got loosened from the bricks by the driving of nails and plugs for the boards which I had put up to hang specimens upon. So that it will be necessary to take from the wall this part of the plaster. I have concluded to change my office into the back room till these paintings are finished.

1856

- April 1 I believe I will finish the painting of the agricultural room and report it to the department as ready for occupation. Then let his committees fight for it.
- April 11 The painted chamber, the agriculture room, is finished and cleaned out. The key has been sent by the secretary to the Speaker of the House of Representatives. I think that whatever committee takes possession of it will have a hard time with the public who throng to see it.
- July 25 I went today to the committee room to meet the committee on expenditures upon public building, as I had been told by the Chairman, Mr. McMullen, that he intended to call them to conference this day and wished me present. They were called in the room of the Committee on Agriculture, the frescoed chamber. Only two Members, including the Chairman, assembled, so that as there was no quorum, there was no business

done. The fresco painting, if thought by some extravagant, is evidently popular with the Members.

Sept. 5 I wrote today to the Clerk of the House of Representatives to ask him to cause the person

left in charge of the room in the south wing to attend to his duty so far as to keep the room open. So many persons come to look at it from a distance and find it closed that we are annoyed by their complaints.