

Preface

Constantino Brumidi, who proudly described himself as “the artist of the Capitol” and was later dubbed “the Michelangelo of the Capitol,” left an indelible mark on the interior of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. My challenge in preparing this book has been to create a three-dimensional picture of the painter who was so skilled in creating the illusion of three dimensions in his paintings. The primary focus is on Brumidi’s murals in the Capitol: their history, artistic harmony, symbolism, and meaning. To show the breadth and complexity of Brumidi’s achievement, I have included background on his training and experience in Italy; pointed out his church and private commissions; and explained the architectural, political, and technical contexts in which he worked at the Capitol. No longer can Brumidi be seen as if he were working in isolation. The careful compilation and analysis of the historic documents has yielded a much more accurate picture of the creation of the murals in the Capitol and has helped dispel a number of widely held misconceptions about the artist. In addition to providing scholarly description and interpretation, this book is designed to be accessible and useful to those who work in or visit the Capitol and are intrigued by Brumidi’s paintings and curious about their history.

The secondary focus of the book is the way conservation has made possible the full appreciation of Brumidi’s art. The ongoing Capitol mural conservation program, based on the 1981 survey and begun in 1984 by Architect of the Capitol George M. White, has contributed greatly to the understanding of Brumidi’s work, which can now accurately be seen for the first time in many decades. Brumidi’s paintings are being restored as nearly as possible to their original appearance, and photographs taken during treatment demonstrate the dramatic difference that conservation has made. The reader will learn about new insights into his technique and working methods acquired during the conservation process and will also gain a sense of the principles and various tactics employed by professional conservators today.

Brumidi’s work is described in numerous early guidebooks, such as *Keim’s Capitol Interiors and Diagrams*, 1874, and George C. Hazleton’s *The National Capitol*, first published in 1897. It was Hazleton who suggested that Brumidi could be called “the Michelangelo of the Capitol.” Curator Charles E. Fairman included brief summaries of Brumidi’s life and work in his 1913 *Works of Art in the United States Capitol* and his 1927 *Art and Artists of the United States Capitol*.

This book builds on the pioneering monograph *Constantino Brumidi: Michelangelo of the Capitol*, by Myrtle Cheney Murdock, published in 1950. Mrs. Murdock became curious about Brumidi when she arrived in Washington in 1937 as the wife of an Arizona congressman; while giving tours of the Capitol, she discovered how little was known about the artist. She gathered letters and other documents, located his wife’s descendant Mildred Thompson, found works by him in private collections, and marked his grave. Without claiming to be a scholar, Mrs. Murdock summarized Brumidi’s life and work, often by quoting primary documents. Her book was the first publication to include color images of the artist’s work. The most recent editions of *Art in the United States Capitol* (1976 and 1978) include lists and numerous color illustrations of Brumidi’s murals. However, only since their publication was the extent to which his designs had been altered by overpaint and grime recognized.

Information about Brumidi was gathered for many years by Florian H. Thayne, head of the Art and Reference Division for the Architect of the Capitol, and by curators Dr. David Sellin and Dr. Anne-Imelda M. Radice. A program of five conference-seminars, “Constantino Brumidi and the Interior Decorations of the Nation’s Capitol,” was organized by history professor Pellegrino Nazzaro at the Rochester Institute

of Technology in 1976. Dr. Nazzaro was the first to describe Brumidi's work in Italy and to uncover details of his arrest and trial; his research in the Vatican and other archives in Rome is summarized in chapter 2. Brumidi was included in the 1983 exhibition *The Capitol Image* at the National Museum of American Art, curated by Andrew J. Cosentino and Henry H. Glassie. In 1985, a small exhibition about Brumidi in the Crypt of the Capitol was prepared for the United States Senate Commission on Art and Antiquities by the Senate Curator, in cooperation with the Architect of the Capitol. A case featuring Brumidi's work is part of the permanent exhibit on the Capitol prepared by the Architect of the Capitol and installed in 1990. Recently, serious attention has been given to Brumidi by art historians in Italy, including Barbara Steindl, who wrote her dissertation on the Palazzo Torlonia, and Alberta Campitelli, curator of the villas of Rome, who with Marco Fabio Apolloni and others has published a book on the Villa Torlonia. They have elevated his status to "Michelangelo of the United States." Overall, however, the number of scholarly articles published on Brumidi is small, as is evident from the bibliography in this volume.

I first proposed a book on Brumidi in 1987, to focus on the conservation of the Rotunda frescoes. With the support of funds for the bicentennial appropriated by Congress, intensive work on this more comprehensive publication began in late 1991. With the able research assistance of Julie Aronson and Ann Kenny, hundreds of documents pertaining to Brumidi's life and work were gathered and organized. We compiled a comprehensive chronology of over 700 entries, of which the one included is a synopsis. A significant new resource was the transcription of the journals of Montgomery C. Meigs, Supervising Engineer of the Capitol Extension and Dome from 1853 to 1859. The transcriptions from archaic Pittman shorthand were made by William Mohr and edited by Ellen McDougall under the auspices of Senate Historian Dr. Richard A. Baker for the United States Senate Bicentennial Commission. Among the most thrilling sections of the journals for art historians and conservators have been Meigs's description of his first meeting with Brumidi and his eyewitness account of the execution of the first fresco in the Capitol; these are excerpted in Appendix A.

This book is organized chronologically, with chapters by the contributing authors interspersed as appropriate. I have provided an overview of Brumidi the artist and person, an explanation of his painting techniques, a sense of the artistic and political context in which he worked, and a history of his work at the Capitol. The rooms are discussed chronologically in the order in which Brumidi first began painting on the wall, although in many cases he was still trying to complete his design many years later. Following the history of the decoration of each room is a description intended to serve as a guide to someone standing in the space.

Supplementing and complementing this history are Dr. Pellegrino Nazzaro's background on Brumidi's life in Rome and the description by William C. Allen, Architectural Historian for the Architect of the Capitol, of the architectural and political context in which Brumidi worked during the construction of the Capitol extensions and the new dome. He focuses on the often conflicting roles, tastes, and personalities of architect Thomas U. Walter and engineer Montgomery C. Meigs, and their influence on the Capitol's decoration. Independent art historian Dr. Francis V. O'Connor explicates his theory about the ways in which Brumidi's subjects and symbols in the canopy and frieze take into account the themes already existing in the Rotunda and how they fit into a complex three-dimensional scheme. Conservators Bernard Rabin and Constance S. Silver describe their treatment of Brumidi's major frescoes in the Rotunda; their chapter, derived from the detailed reports submitted to the Architect of the Capitol, offers new information about the artist's working methods and achievement as well as providing a sense of the restoration process itself. Conservator Christiana Cunningham-Adams and her husband and partner George W. Adams summarize insights gained from their study of original techniques and later changes in the Brumidi Corridors.

The text is supplemented by Appendix A, the entries in Montgomery C. Meigs's journal pertaining to Brumidi's first work in the Capitol; Appendix B, a list of artists working with or under Brumidi; and Appendix C, a list of the works by Brumidi in the Capitol, and his known works in private collections and churches. This list is a work in progress; additional information about his paintings is eagerly sought and will be added to the files and the computerized chronology maintained in the Office of the Curator of the Architect of the Capitol. Finally, the chronology and bibliography are in themselves significant new contributions to Brumidi scholarship.

All of the documentation that has been gathered, however, still provides us with only a skeleton. Surviving correspondence relates almost exclusively to work assignments and payments. Brumidi left no journal nor any records of his creative ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Lack of personal correspondence leaves many questions about his personal life and motivations unanswered. Thus, intriguing mysteries and gaps remain.

Tellingly, even the issue of Brumidi's first name is confusing. The conflicting pieces of documentary evidence about this single detail suggest the challenge that this research has entailed. The Italian name "Costantino" appears in the records found in Rome. His Greek father, however, may have combined the Greek Konstantinos and the Italian Costantino into "Constantino," the name the artist inscribed in the Bible given him on landing in New York. (However, Brumidi also recorded anglicized versions of his Italian children's names in the same Bible.) "Constantino" would have been more easily understood by Americans who were familiar with "Constantine," a version which the artist also occasionally used. The majority of his letters and paintings are signed simply "C. Brumidi," yet "Constantine," "Costantino," and "Constantino" also appear on letters and other documents. The last will and testament of "Constantino Brumidi" was signed with the Italian version "Costantino," showing that the names were interchangeable to him; both were also used in a single document written by his son. Such variance in the spelling of names was common in the period, especially in the case of immigrants. For consistency, the first name most frequently appearing in manuscripts and published references, "Constantino," is used in this book.

This book was prepared under the direction of now retired Architect of the Capitol George M. White, whose commitment to and personal interest in the mural conservation program has been key to its success. I owe my deepest thanks for direction and support to him and to his former Administrative Assistant William F. Raines, Jr., and Staff Assistant L. Gail Stanley. The preparation of the book was supported with funds allocated for the commemoration of the bicentennial of the United States Capitol and the encouragement of Dr. Raymond Smock, former Historian, U.S. House of Representatives; Dr. Richard A. Baker, Historian, United States Senate; and James R. Ketchum, former Curator, United States Senate. The publication was sponsored by the Commission for the Bicentennial of the United States Capitol, co-chaired by the majority and minority leaders of both bodies. Former Secretary of the Senate Walter J. Stewart took particular interest in seeing a new book on Brumidi and was a key player in making it a reality. Insightful comments on the draft were made by my colleagues Dr. Richard A. Baker, Cynthia Pease Miller, James R. Ketchum, Diane K. Skvarla, and Dr. Donald R. Kennon. A number of outside experts contributed to knowledge of Brumidi. Thanks are particularly due Henry Hope Reed and his researcher Dr. Maria Antonietta de Angelis for providing copies of many documents from Italian archives. Marco Fabio Apolloni and Alberta Campitelli were generous in sharing information about Brumidi's Italian projects. For assistance during my visit to Rome, I am also grateful to Sabina Marchi, Pio Baldi, Rosso di Gaspari, and Daniella Muratori. Other researchers who have shared their knowledge are Kent Ahrens, Father George Anderson, Andrew J. Cosentino, John Dumvill, Eloise Quiñones Keber, Franco Lancetti, Edna W. Macomb, Keith Melder, Colonel Merl Moore, Arthur J. Phelan, Gwenda Smith, and John Trunnell. In addition to the conservators who contributed to the

text, Larry Keck, Perry Hurt, and Arthur Page offered helpful comments. Other readers to whom I owe thanks are Elizabeth W. Fisher, Dr. Percy North, David Ransom, and Peter Byrd, in addition to all of the outside authors, who deserve thanks for their contributions and their patience through numerous revisions.

In addition to research assistants Julie Aronson and Ann Kenny, my staff has been enthusiastic in assisting with the preparation of the book. Special thanks are due Sarah Turner, Pamela McConnell, Deborah Neal, and former staff members Linnaea Dix and Kim Soucy. Substantive editing was provided by Cynthia Ware, while Eric Paff diligently carried through on copy editing and many final details. The majority of the photographs so essential to this book were skillfully produced by the Photography Branch headed by Wayne Firth, assisted by Stephen Payne, Loretta Beasley, and Chuck Badal. I was gratified by the enthusiasm with which Government Printing Office staff John Sapp, Lyle Green, Technical Review Section and designer Deborah Rhode greeted this project and thankful for their expertise in piloting the book through the publication process. *Constantino Brumidi: Artist of the Capitol* is the product of the team efforts of my unfailingly supportive staff and co-authors and of the interest and faith of many individuals in the office of the Architect of the Capitol and in numerous congressional offices.

NOTE: Works of art illustrated are by Constantino Brumidi unless otherwise indicated. Information regarding their medium, dimensions, dates, and location or collection can be found in Appendix C. Room numbers are given in the captions for mural paintings in the Capitol. Photographs included in this book are in the records of the Architect of the Capitol unless other collection or photo credits are given.