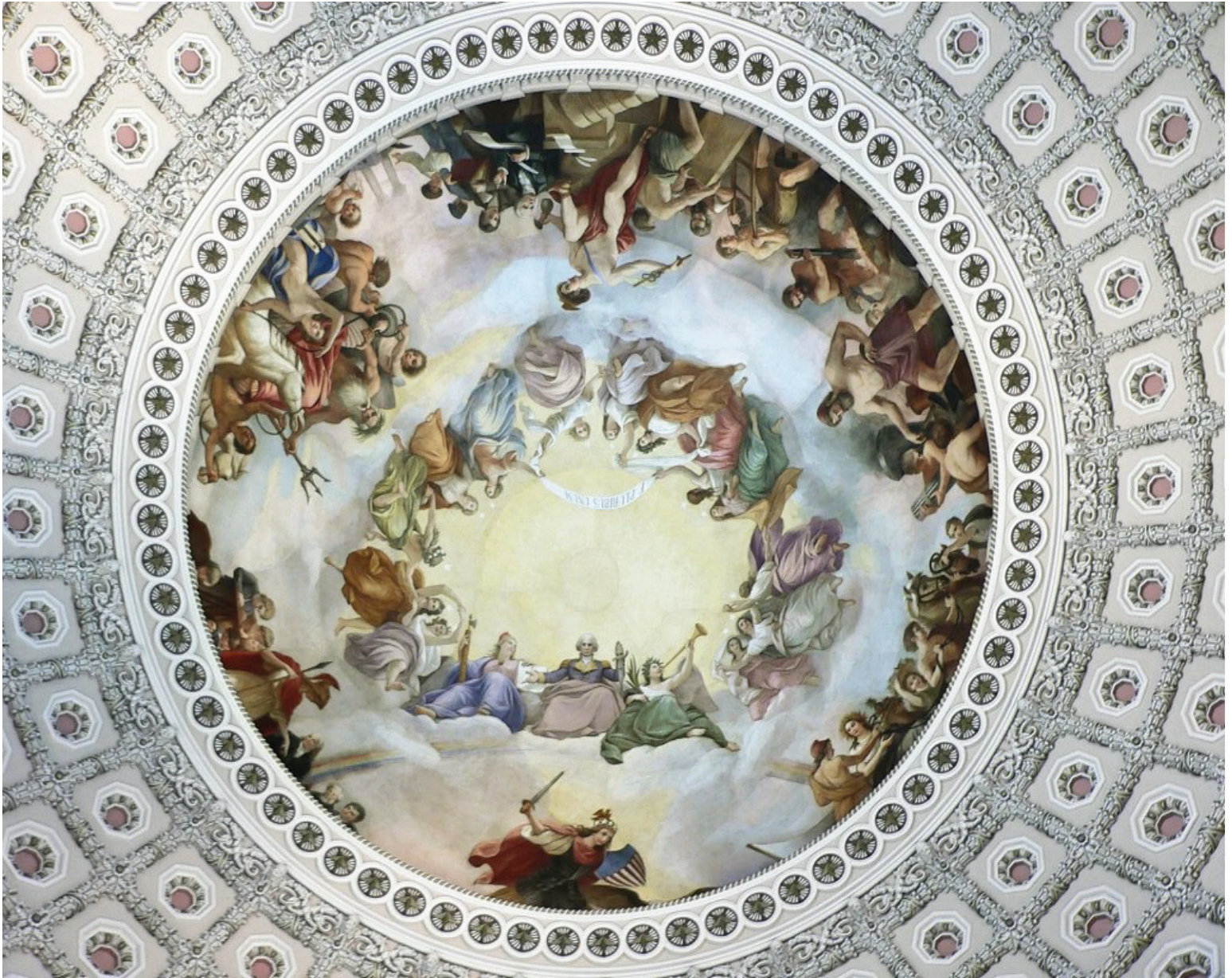


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BY JOE SANO

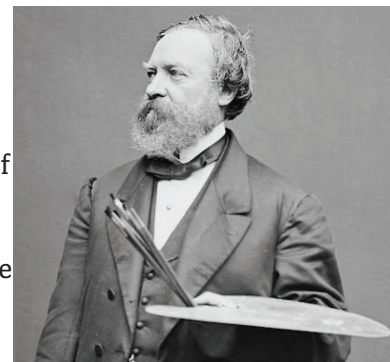


CONSTANTINO BRUMIDI

THE “MICHAELANGELO” OF WASHINGTON

As we celebrate the 250th Anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, let us reflect on one of the great Italian American contributors to the beauty of our nation’s Capitol. Constantino Brumidi was the principal artist of the U.S. Capitol. Born in Rome, Brumidi was trained at the Academy of St. Luke in the full range of painting mediums, including true fresco, painted in sections on fresh plaster, and sculpture. He achieved mastery of the human figure and learned how to create the appearance

of three-dimensional forms on a flat surface, an effect called trompe l’oeil or fool-the-eye. He painted murals for popes and princes and was considered one of Rome’s best artists. However, he got involved with the early failed attempts at Italian unification. He was imprisoned and sentenced to many years in prison.



He received a papal pardon with the stated condition that he would be leaving for America. Arriving in New York in September 1852, he immediately applied for citizenship, which was granted in 1857.

It was Capitol dome architect Thomas Walter who asked Brumidi 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."

Brumidi's artistic vision yielded *The Apotheosis of Washington* (1865), a 4,664-square-foot, "true fresco" located 180 feet up in the eye of the Rotunda dome, depicting George Washington rising to heaven. "The Apotheosis of Washington," his most ambitious work at the Capitol Building, was painted in 11 months at the end of the Civil War, soon after the new dome was completed. The figures, up to 15 feet tall, were painted to be intelligible from close up as well as from 180 feet below.

Brumidi depicted George Washington rising to the heavens in glory, flanked by female figures representing Liberty and Victory/Fame. A rainbow arches at his feet, and thirteen maidens symbolizing the original states flank the three central figures. The word "apotheosis" in the title means literally the raising of a person to the rank of a god, or the glorification of a person as an ideal. Six groups of figures line the perimeter of the canopy; the following list begins below the central group and proceeds clockwise:

- 1. War**, with Armed Freedom and the eagle defeating Tyranny and Kingly Power
- 2. Science**, with Minerva teaching Benjamin Franklin, Robert Fulton, and Samuel F.B. Morse
- 3. Marine**, with Neptune holding his trident and Venus holding the transatlantic cable, which was being laid at the time the fresco was painted
- 4. Commerce**, with Mercury handing a bag of money to Robert Morris, financier of the American Revolution
- 5. Mechanics**, with Vulcan at the anvil and forge, producing a cannon and a steam engine.

Brumidi also adorned the Senate Wing which today is known as the Brumidi Corridor. These five hallways are adorned with elaborate, vibrant frescoes featuring birds, animals, flowers, and allegorical figures, blending Italian Renaissance style with American symbols. He also painted elaborate scenes in 5 additional Senate meeting rooms.

In 1859, his final contribution was the creation of a sketch for the Rotunda frieze (circumference band around the lower part of the dome). Without any ok to start his work, he finally was allowed to begin in 1877. After enlarging the sketches for the first scenes, Brumidi



began painting the frieze in 1878, at the age of 73. His design traces America's history from the landing of Columbus to the discovery of gold in California. While working on the figure of William Penn in the scene "William Penn and the Indians," Brumidi's chair slipped on the scaffold platform. He saved himself from falling 75 feet only by clinging to the rung of a ladder for 15 minutes until he was rescued. He returned to the scaffold once more but then worked on enlarging his remaining sketches until his death a few months later in February 1880.

Any trip to the U.S. Capitol is not complete unless the artistic visions of the Italian American Master - Constantino Brumidi are experienced in person. They are indeed exceptional. □

