

E PLURIBUS UNUM



CHAPTER 10

Symbolism in the Rotunda

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The only inscription in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol is the Latin motto *E Pluribus Unum* (from the many, one), painted in the dome by Constantino Brumidi during the Civil War (fig. 10-1). Indeed, the dome of the Capitol was erected and decorated as a symbol of the steadfastness and confidence of the Union during the height of that great insurrection (fig. 10-2).¹ Brumidi submitted his design and began negotiating his commission for the dome painting during the autumn of 1862, while the Capitol was being used as a hospital for wounded soldiers. He worked on his cartoons while battles raged, from early 1863, when his commission was approved, to the end of the year. When finally, in late 1864, the canopy was installed and Brumidi was able to start painting, the war had still not ended.

Brumidi was the first accomplished American muralist in fresco. Before him, murals had been painted in oils or tempera on wood or plaster, mostly in domestic interiors, and took the form of wall panels, overmantels depicting

Fig. 10-1. Detail of inscription “*E Pluribus Unum*.” Maidens representing the original states hold a banner in The Apotheosis of Washington. Rotunda.



Fig. 10-2. The Capitol after completion of the dome, 1866. *Brumidi could not begin painting the canopy until the dome was constructed.*

local or fanciful scenes, or landscape panoramas.² Brumidi worked in an Italian stylistic tradition that went back to Raphael's walls in the Vatican and relied heavily on allegory and elaborate architectural embellishment. His corridor designs were in the Pompeian style of ancient Roman frescoes. Many American critics found this foreign style inappropriate to the central edifice of democracy (see chapter 7). But the classically inspired architecture of the newly expanded Capitol was similarly “foreign,” and Brumidi's way of

painting was more than suitable to its antique splendor.

The secret of Brumidi's genius, however, is not to be found so much in the style to which he was born and which he imposed at the Capitol as in his capacity to see the whole from its parts and to find an elegant overall solution to any pictorial or symbolic problem with which he was faced, as he did in the Agriculture Committee room (see chapter 5). It is plain that none of the highly skilled artists working with him at the Capitol, such as Emmerich Carstens or James Leslie, or those who came after him, such as Filippo Costaggini or Allyn Cox, could match him in this totality of skill and vision.³ Thus an artist of Brumidi's temperament could well appreciate the aesthetic dimension inherent in the political ideal of unity that impelled his patrons and in the symbolism of raising up the dome of the Capitol to proclaim the republic's integrity in the midst of a savage and draining civil war.

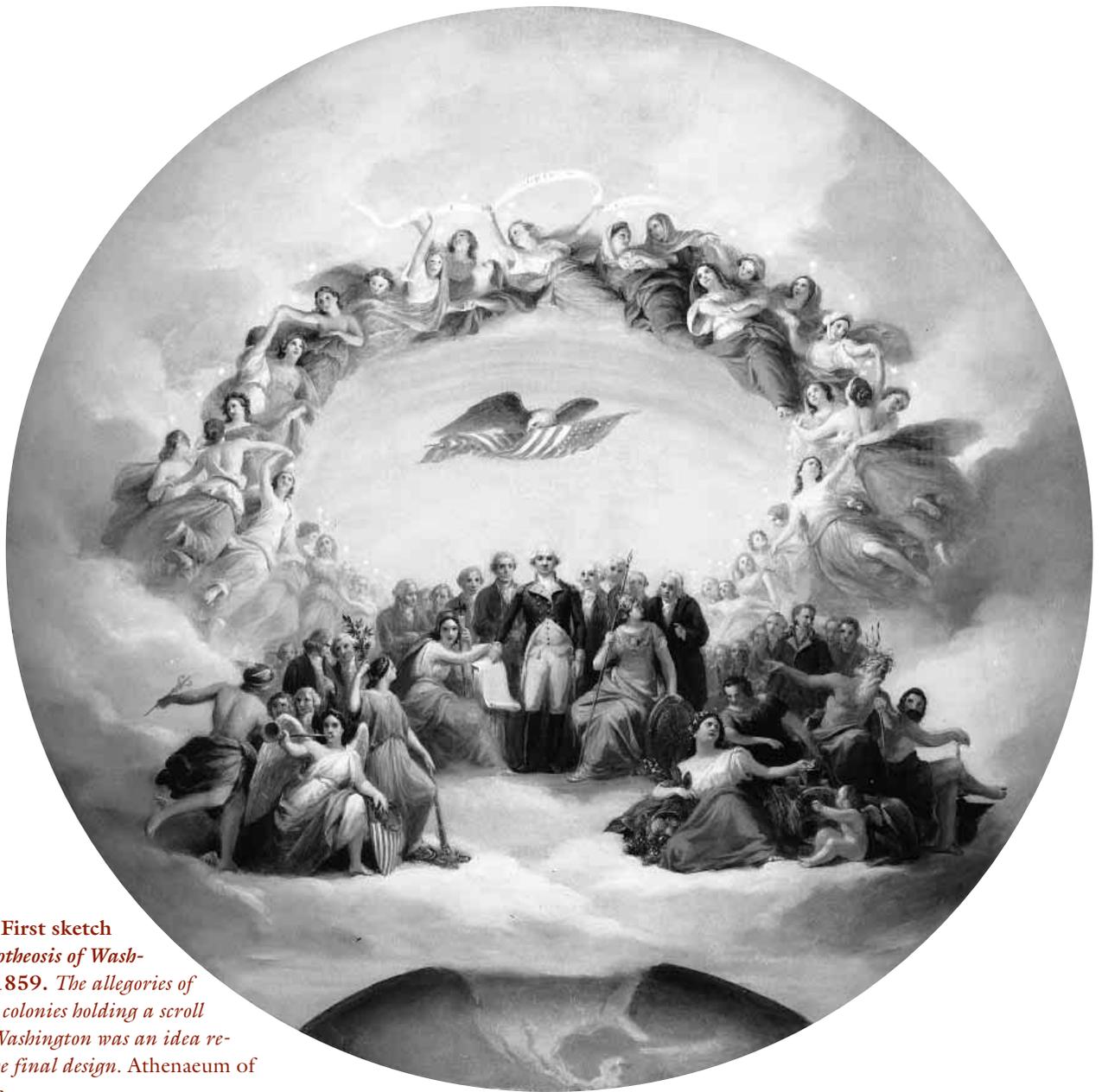


Fig. 10-3. First sketch for *The Apotheosis of Washington*, c. 1859. The allegories of the thirteen colonies holding a scroll encircling Washington was an idea retained in the final design. Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

The Evolution of *The Apotheosis*

It is almost possible to see Brumidi's conception of a unified symbolic program for the central space of the Capitol develop in the succession of studies he made for *The Apotheosis of Washington* in the vast canopy of the Rotunda's dome. The first study, in oil on canvas (fig.10-3), depicted Washington, his head at dead center, standing with a group of the Founding Fathers and flanked by deities and allegorical figures. Above Washington's head is an eagle holding a flag, while at the bottom can be seen the Earth, with the North American continent clearly visible.

Brumidi soon realized that this first conception, with its axial symmetry establishing a clear top and bottom,

would be seen as upside down or sideways from three of the four entrances to the Rotunda. His second sketch (fig. 10-4) attempted to achieve a greater centricity, placing an oval portrait supported by putti and flanked by allegories in the middle of the composition supported by the arc of a rainbow. Below this central group, the eagle brandishing arrows harries the forces of discord and strife, while to the right Mercury holds aloft the caduceus and, opposite, putti offer the land's abundance. The arc of the thirteen colonies, with their scroll, appears above; and above them is a firmament containing thirty-three stars. This detail plausibly dates the sketch to 1859, when the thirty-third state, Oregon, was admitted to the Union. While this was certainly a great improvement over the



Fig. 10-4. Second sketch for *The Apotheosis of Washington*, c. 1859. Brumidi's second design retained the thirteen maidens but represented Washington with a painted portrait. Private Collection.

first design, it did not solve the problem of a design that would be visually coherent from all sides.⁴

While the history of Brumidi's thinking about the *Apotheosis* between 1859 and 1862, when he was commissioned to paint it, cannot be documented precisely, it can, nevertheless, be deduced with some plausibility. The third and last study for the dome design (fig. 10-5) reveals a complete spatial reconceptualization.⁵ In this final study Brumidi made the crucial conceptual transition from easel painting to monumental mural, from the simple frontality and directional orientation of a conventional wall or ceiling painting to an environmental sense of the soaring space of the enlarged Rotunda. He completely reversed the field of his composition so that the

viewer would look up into the space of the apotheosis. At dead center was no longer the head of the protagonist, but a brilliant, golden sky. Washington is enthroned beneath the sky, flanked by just two allegories, at the west facing east. Above him, but reversed, is the arc of the thirteen colonies, creating a second "eye" to the dome, toward whose blinding glory all heads point, yet turn away. But even more important, he has reorganized the various historical and allegorical figures in the earlier studies into six groupings around the edge of the design in such a way that one or more would appear upright no matter from what angle the whole was viewed.

While redesigning the dome in 1859, architect Thomas U. Walter incorporated Brumidi's design into his plans



Fig. 10-5. Final sketch for *The Apotheosis of Washington*, c. 1859–1862. The large oil sketch, three feet in diameter, of the final composition, now in a private collection, is shown in the photograph copyrighted by Brumidi in 1866.

Photo: Gardner.

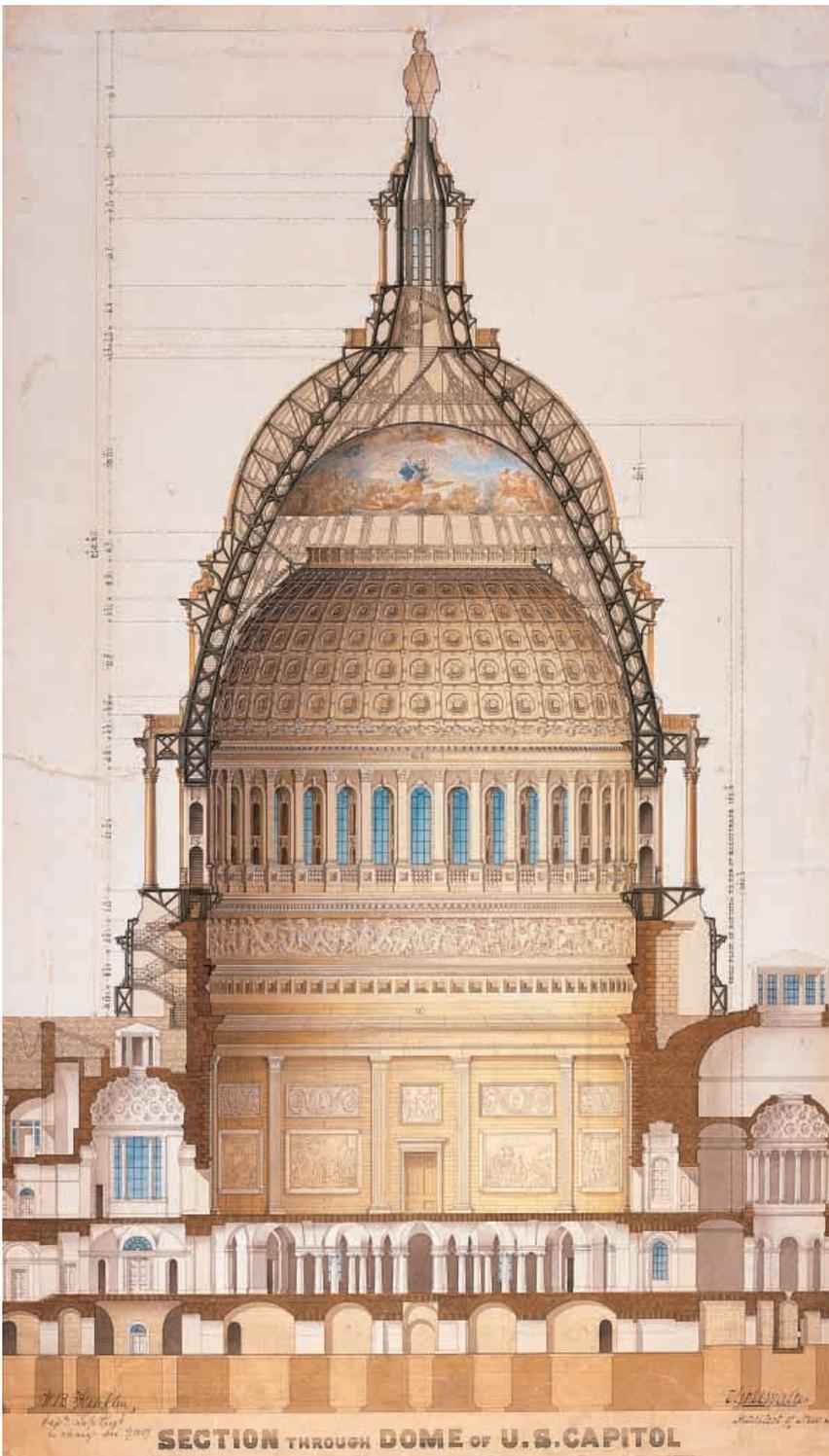


Fig. 10–6. Thomas U. Walter, *Section through Dome of U.S. Capitol*, 1859. The cross section shows Brumidi’s final design for a fresco in the canopy. Architect of the Capitol.

(fig. 10–6). His rendering of a cross section of the Rotunda with the redesigned dome clearly shows the canopy and the frieze—the latter represented by a row of figures that echo the Parthenon frieze—in relation to the eight earlier historical paintings installed in the Rotunda walls. In the drawing, two designs for the canopy mural are visible. The first is a vague generalization—a line drawing of a landscape with groups of figures and horses surrounding a

central, enthroned allegorical figure. It is, however, painted over in watercolor with a depiction of Freedom and other figures identical to those Brumidi ultimately executed.⁶

Brumidi began in the spring of 1863 to work up his full-scale cartoons for the dome and to perfect his design. He spent the following year painting the nearly 5,000-square-foot concave surface. The canopy fresco was unveiled in January 1866 (see frontispiece).



Fig. 10-7. View from the balcony to the Rotunda floor. *Brumidi would have been aware of the total space encompassed under the new dome.*

The Relationship of the Canopy Fresco to the Rotunda

The finished canopy permits the viewer 180 feet below to look up into a great funnel of light, which radiates through a vast well. From the vantage point of the balcony surrounding the eye of the dome, with the great frescoed canopy soaring 21 feet above and the Rotunda below (fig. 10-7), it is clear that Brumidi not only solved the technical problem of multiple vantage points, but he also used the ribbing of the new dome to correlate his six allegorical groups with the history paintings and sculptured reliefs set in the lower walls, creating a set of formal and symbolic relationships between his crowning creation and the earlier works of art.

In Brumidi's time the eight historical paintings were arranged differently than they are today.⁷ The original locations and relationships are reconstructed in figures 10-8 and 10-9. (The letters and numbers in parentheses in the following paragraphs refer to these diagrams.) The four earlier paintings, by John Trumbull, installed on the

western side of the Rotunda, are *Declaration of Independence in Congress* (a), *Surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga* (b), *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown* (c), and *General George Washington Resigning His Commission to Congress as Commander in Chief of the Army* (d). Installed later on the eastern side were Robert Weir's *Embarkation of the Pilgrims* (e), John Vanderlyn's *Landing of Columbus* (f), William Powell's *Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto* (g), and John Chapman's *Baptism of Pocahontas* (h). These works, set into the walls in huge, carved frames similar to the overmantels of their day, constituted the first public, monumental mural environment in the country. If they seem a bit oddly composed today, it is well to remember that they were conceived to be seen beneath Charles Bulfinch's lower hemispherical dome, which sprang from the entablature directly above them, not at the bottom of Walter's 180-foot well.⁸

Also on the walls of the lower Rotunda, clockwise from the west door, are eight alternating sculptured reliefs of

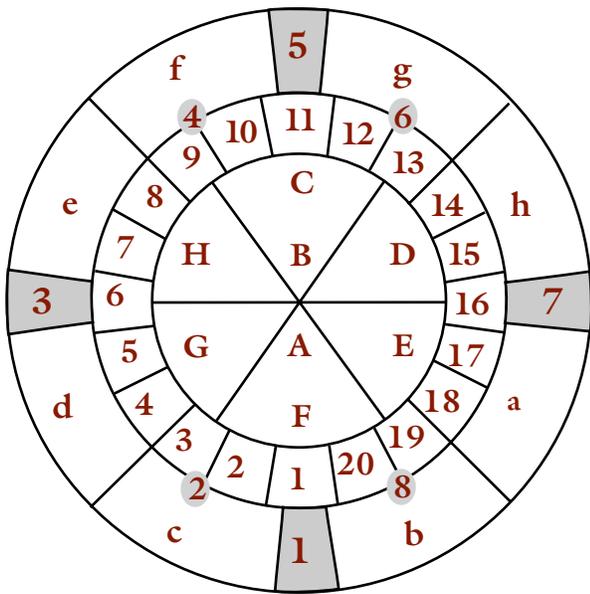


Fig. 10-8. Diagram showing the theoretical relationship of the works of art in the Rotunda. The diagram is made as if looking down from the center of the canopy. (See key to identify murals and relief sculptures.)

The Canopy of the Dome

- A George Washington with Liberty and Victory/Fame
- B Allegories of the Thirteen Colonies with Scroll
- C Commerce—Mercury with Bankers of the Revolution
- D Marine—Neptune and Venus with the Atlantic Cable
- E Science—Minerva with Franklin, Morse, and Fulton
- F War—Freedom defeating Tyranny and Kingly Power
- G Agriculture—Ceres with a Reaper
- H Mechanics—Vulcan forging Cannon into Railroads

The Frieze

(Brumidi's titles on the sketch, with his spelling)

- 1 America and History
- 2 Landing of Columbus
- 3 Cortez and Montezuma at Mexican Temple
- 4 Pizarro going to Peru
- 5 De Soto's burial in the Mississippi River
- 6 Indians Hunting Buffalo
- 7 [missing]
- 8 Cap Smith and Pocahontas
- 9 Landing of the Pilgrims
- 10 Settlement of Pennsylvania
- 11 Colonization of New England
- 12 Ogelethorpe and muscogee chief
- 13 Lexington insurrection
- 14 Declaration of the Independence
- 15 Surrender of Cornwallis
- 16 Lewis and Clarke
- 17 Decatur at Tripoli
- 18 Col Johnson & Tecumseh
- 19 The American Army going in the City of Mexico
- 20 A laborer in the employ of Cap Sutter

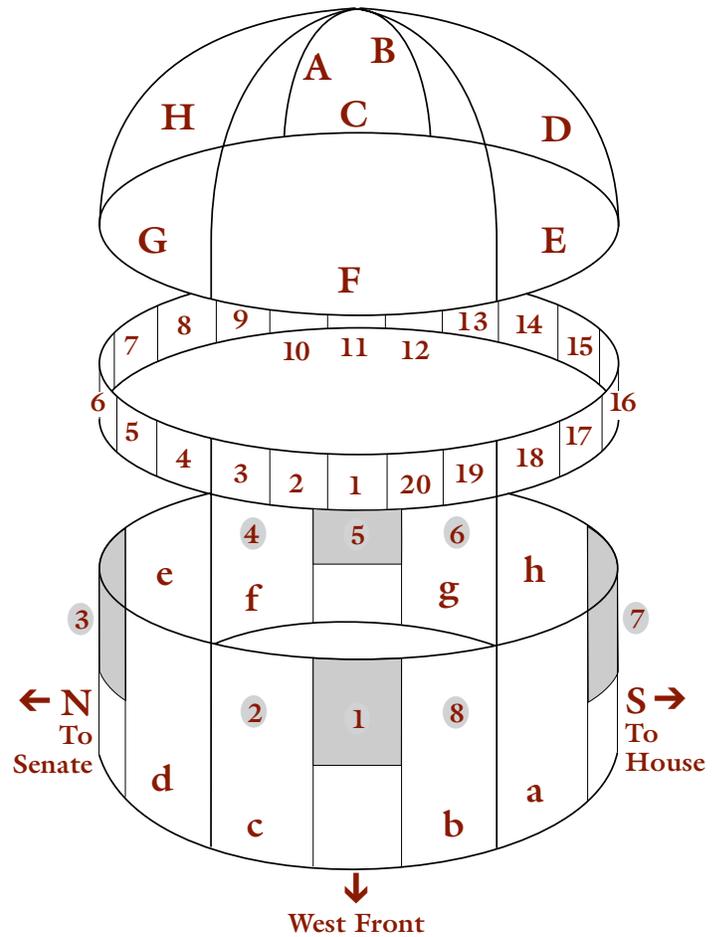


Fig. 10-9. Diagram of the dome, frieze, historical murals, and relief sculpture. This graphic representation shows the works of art in the Rotunda in their theoretical three-dimensional relationship. (See key to identify murals and relief sculptures.)

The Historical Murals

- a Trumbull, *Declaration of Independence*
- b Trumbull, *Surrender of General Burgoyne*
- c Trumbull, *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*
- d Trumbull, *George Washington Resigning his Commission*
- e Weir, *Embarkation of the Pilgrims*
- f Vanderlyn, *Landing of Columbus*
- g Powell, *De Soto's Discovery of the Mississippi*
- h Chapman, *Baptism of Pocahontas*

The Relief Sculpture

- 1 Capellano, *Preservation of Captain Smith by Pocahontas*
- 2 Causici, *Christopher Columbus*
- 3 Gevelot, *William Penn's Treaty with the Indians*
- 4 Capellano, *Robert La Salle*
- 5 Causici, *Landing of the Pilgrims*
- 6 Causici, *John Cabot*
- 7 Causici, *Conflict of Daniel Boone and the Indians*
- 8 Capellano, *Sir Walter Raleigh*

historical events and tondo portraits of early discoverers: *Preservation of Captain Smith by Pocahontas* ①, *Christopher Columbus* ②, *William Penn's Treaty with the Indians* ③, *René Robert Cavalier Sieur de La Salle* ④, *Landing of the Pilgrims* ⑤, *John Cabot* ⑥, *Conflict of Daniel Boone with the Indians* ⑦, and *Sir Walter Raleigh* ⑧, carved between 1825 and 1827 by Enrico Causici, Antonio Capellano, and Nicholas Gevelot.⁹

Gazing down on the Rotunda, Brumidi would certainly have been conscious of the significance of the older murals and sculptures. It is also apparent that he was aware of compass orientation, as anyone involved with an architectural environment would be. In arranging his motifs in the Agriculture Committee room (H-144), for instance, he oriented the allegories of the seasons to the cardinal points. There, Spring is placed to the ever-renewing east, Summer to the nurturing south, Autumn's fruition and death to the opposites inherent in the west's sunset, and Winter to the cold and mysterious north. This perennial directional symbolism of dawn, day, dusk, and dark plays its role in Brumidi's Rotunda program as it did in all the great mural cycles he would have known in Italy, such as Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, where the *Last Judgment*, with its opposition of good and evil, is placed on a west wall. This sense of environmental context was an important factor in Brumidi's arrangement of the six groups of gods and goddesses in the dome.

The iconography of the canopy fresco, with its conjunctions of deities and humans, may seem strange to us today. However, in the mid-nineteenth century the personification of abstract ideas by means of figures drawn from classical mythology and the association of historical figures such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin with these was part of the cultural vocabulary. The gods and goddesses stood allegorically for universal virtues embodied in popular historical personalities. Thus Washington sits enthroned in the pose of all-powerful Jupiter, and the great inventor and political philosopher Franklin is associated with Minerva, goddess of wisdom. The complete meaning of Brumidi's dome can be understood only in respect to these traditional attributes of the gods and goddesses and how they are related to the historical figures in their immediate context around the edge of the canopy. These iconographic meanings are also reinforced by symbolic placement both above and opposite the historical paintings and sculptured reliefs.

Washington, flanked by allegories of Liberty and Victory/Fame (*A*) (see fig. 9-1), sits enthroned above Freedom (*F*) (see fig. 9-16), who, along with a militant bald eagle holding arrows, wreaks havoc among the forces of war, tyranny, and discord. The latter are represented by figures with a cannon, a king in armor holding a scepter and an ermine-lined cape, and anarchists with torches. All

these figures are on the west surface of the canopy. They thus face the east front of the Capitol and are the first images seen when one looks up from the east door of the Rotunda. They also face Columbus, the Pilgrims, and de Soto—those who discovered and settled the land to which Washington's leadership gave liberty by means of victories such as those he and his generals won over Burgoyne and Cornwallis, above which—along with the first victory of Christian love over “heathen savagery”—they are directly situated.

Next, Ceres, the goddess of agriculture (*G*) (see fig. 9-17), is seen riding on a reaper filled with grain and attended by Young America wearing a liberty cap. She is holding a cornucopia, the traditional symbol of plenty, which is crowned by a pineapple—a rare and exotic fruit at the time. Ceres's retinue is completed by Flora, the goddess of fertility and flowers, picking blossoms in the foreground, and Pomona, the goddess of fruit, carrying in the background a basket overflowing with the earth's abundance. An image of Vulcan, god of the forge (*H*) (see fig. 9-18), dominates the following scene. His foot is set firmly on a cannon, and a steam engine is in the background. His pose and activity signify the peaceful intentions and modernity of American industry.

Both Ceres and Vulcan face south from the north surface, to the region of daily enterprise and growth, where Pocahontas, Daniel Boone, and the Declaration of Independence symbolize the planting of spiritual and political seeds and the forging of territory-spanning industry. Similarly, both preside over the sowing of democracy inherent in Washington's resigning his commission and in the Pilgrims who first tamed the wilderness, which was soon to be conquered nationally.

To the east reigns Mercury, the trickster god of opposites and of commerce (*C*) (see fig. 9-19), who faces west, toward the conflicts of warfare and surrender. In his guise as god of travelers, however, he presides above Columbus, the Pilgrims, and de Soto — while holding over all the caduceus, symbol of healing and peaceful interactions. In this respect, he is surrounded by the heaving and hauling of boxes and bales. Shipping is represented to the right by two sailors with an anchor. One of the sailors gestures to an ironclad boat in the background, which may refer to one of the great naval achievements of the Civil War, the building of the ironclad ships such as the *Monitor*. The god himself deals with one of the bankers of the Revolution, Robert Morris, to whom he offers a bag of money. Similar bags are stashed at the foot of his dais. It is interesting and amusing to note that Brumidi chose to identify himself with the god of commerce by signing his masterpiece (the inscription reads “C. Brumidi/1865”) on the box next to these.

Neptune and Venus are shown together (*D*) (see fig. 9-20) in one of the most beautifully designed groupings

in the dome. The bearded god of the oceans rides his horse-drawn chariot of shells and holds the trident, while his attendants hold aloft the transatlantic cable—the communications revolution of the day—which the sea gods happily receive into their realm. Venus, draped in a blue robe, is born from the sea next to Neptune, and is attended by a putto riding a dolphin.

These sea deities, along with Minerva (*E*) (see fig. 9–21), are on the south surface and face into the region of northern darkness and mystery, where the Pilgrims, Penn, and Washington stand for the heroism and self-sacrifice needed to overcome an untamed continent and the temptations of political power. Below the water gods Neptune and Venus are to be found de Soto, the discoverer of a great river, and Pocahontas, the first Indian to receive the waters of baptism.

Minerva (*E*), the goddess of wisdom, is shown surrounded to the left by educators teaching children and to the right by famous scientists such as Benjamin Franklin, Samuel F. B. Morse, and Robert Fulton. She gestures to one of Franklin's electrical experiments with Leyden jars, the precursor of Morse's magnetic telegraph, which ultimately prompted the laying of the transatlantic cable, allegorically depicted in the contiguous scene. Symbolically, she is situated directly over the signing of the Declaration of Independence, whose wisdom engendered liberty and progress in the land.

There is thus sufficient circumstantial evidence in the symbolic relationships just described between the gods in the dome and the historical murals and reliefs below to support the argument that Brumidi was thinking in terms of a comprehensive program for the Rotunda in the manner of the many European counterparts he would have known, and similar to the carefully integrated programs he had already developed in the Capitol's various committee rooms. On this basis, one can presume that his design for the frieze was intended to be similarly integrated into his overall conception.

The Frieze of American History

As the second element of the Rotunda program, Walter and Meigs had envisioned a sculptured frieze comparable to the famous one on the Athenian Parthenon (see fig. 10–6), but the lack of a suitable sculptor after the death in 1857 of Thomas Crawford, whom Meigs had selected as the sculptor of the Statue of Freedom and of the frieze, as well as cost considerations, forced him to abandon the idea in about 1859. Brumidi conceived a painted frieze of illusionistic sculpture showing historical scenes with an impressive array of life-size figures in sepia grisaille fresco. The completion of the dome and the end of the Civil War brought to a near end Meigs's ambitious art program for

the Capitol. Brumidi himself would be sporadically employed there for the next decade. But at the end of that time the great frieze remained blank.

In 1876 Brumidi petitioned Congress to be allowed to finish the overall Rotunda program, and he was eventually permitted to begin the cartoons for his frieze in 1877. He began painting the fresco in 1878 but died in 1880 before he finished it. Filippo Costaggini was selected to complete the frieze following Brumidi's designs. But miscalculations in the projected dimensions left, from about 1895 until 1953, a 31-foot length of wall unpainted.¹⁰ This was eventually filled by the academic muralist Allyn Cox. His somewhat anachronistic contribution honorably fills the gap, and the stylistic tensions between the three artists are noticeable only to art historians with binoculars (see foldout following chapter 11).

Today it is difficult to understand clearly how Brumidi might have intended to integrate the frieze into his overall symbolic program. There are two reasons for this. First and most obvious is that Brumidi's surviving sketch for the frieze (fig. 10–10) may not be complete and was made in 1859, twenty years before he began to paint. Second, it is plain that the selection of historical events to be shown in the frieze was not the work of the artist alone.

Concerning this last point, surviving documents indicate that both Meigs and the great history painter Emanuel Leutze contributed to the selection of subjects. In his 1855 report Meigs described his conception of the frieze as follows:

The gradual progress of the continent from the depths of barbarism to the heights of civilization; the rude and barbarous civilization of some of the Antecolumbian tribes; the contests of the Aztecs with their less civilized predecessors; their own conquest by the Spanish race; the wilder state of the hunter tribes of our own regions; the discovery, settlement, wars, treaties; the gradual advance of the white, and retreat of the red races, our own revolutionary and other struggles, with the illustration of the higher achievements of our present civilization. . . .¹¹

In a letter to Meigs dated February 8, 1857, Leutze elaborated his scheme for a mural series throughout the Capitol, including a chronological sequence of events.¹² While Meigs rejected this grandiose conception as impractical, he must have been intrigued by the thematic information Leutze had provided, and it is plausible to assume that he discussed his ideas with Brumidi and many other historically aware individuals around the Capitol and in Washington.

In his letter Leutze listed eight divisions for a chronology: discovery, causes of emigration, emigrants, condition of the settlers, revolution, battles (through the War of

Composite Photograph of Brumidi's Original Sketch for the Rotunda Frieze

Reconstructed by Francis V. O'Connor

(Numbers correspond to those for Frieze in figs. 10-8 and 10-9.)



1 America and History

2 Landing of Columbus

3 Cortez and Montezuma at Mexican Temple



6 Indians Hunting Buffalo

7 [missing]



8 Cap Smith and Pocahontas



11 Colonization of New England



12 Ogelethorpe and muscogee chief



15 Surrender of Cornwallis

16 Lewis and Clarke

17 Decatur at Tripoli

18 Col Johnson & Tecumseh

Fig. 10-10. Photo composite of Brumidi's sketch for the frieze, 1859. *Two scenes cut out by Brumidi are reinserted here.* Architect of the Capitol.



4 Pizarro going to Peru

5 De Soto's burial in the Mississippi River



9 Landing of the Pilgrims

10 Settlement of Pennsylvania



13 Lexington insurrection

14 Declaration of the Independence



19 The American Army going in the City of Mexico

20 A laborer in the employ of Cap Sutter

Brumidi's Sequence for the Frieze of American History

Note: Numbers and titles (with Brumidi's spelling) of missing sections, as well as additional wording for unclear or incomplete titles, are supplied in brackets. The letters *M* and *L* indicate the dozen events Meigs and Leutze may have suggested to the artist.

Key Number	Inscribed Number	Inscribed Title	Date of Event	Source
1	[none]	<i>America and History</i> [An Allegory]		
2	[none]	<i>Landing of Columbus</i>	1492	L
3	2	<i>Cortez and Montezuma at Mexican Temple</i>	1521	M
4	3	<i>Pizarro going to Peru</i>	1533	M
5	4	<i>De Soto's burial in the Mississippi River</i>	1542	L

Here the sketch is missing scenes 5 and 6. A tipi's tent peg can be seen in the lower right corner of Brumidi's scene 4, thus clearly placing the Indian scene following. Since the scene with Captain Smith and Pocahontas is numbered 7 in the sketch, a sixth scene is apparently missing.

6	5	[<i>Indians Hunting Buffalo</i>]		M
7	[6]	[Missing from sketch]		
8	7	<i>Cap Smith and Pocahontas</i>	1606	
9	8	<i>Landing of the Pilgrims</i>	1620	L
10	9	<i>Settlement of Pennsylvania</i> [by William Penn's Treaty with the Indians]	1682	
11	10	<i>Colonization of N England</i>	1620	
12	11	<i>Oglethorpe and muscogee chief</i>	1732	
13	12	<i>Lexington insurrection</i>	1775	
14	13	<i>Declaration of the Independence</i>	1776	L
15	14	<i>Surrender of Cornwallis</i>	1781	L

There is a gap between scenes 14 and 16 in the sketch; the Lewis and Clark scene fits here chronologically and numerically.

16	[15]	<i>Lewis and Clarke</i> [Attacked by a Bear]	1804–6	L
17	16	<i>Decatur at Tripoli</i>	1804	L
18	17	<i>Col Johnson & Tecumseh</i>	1813	
19	18	<i>The American army going in the City of Mexico</i>	1847	L
20	[none]	<i>A laborer in the employ of Cap Sutter</i> [during California Gold Rush]	1848	

1812), emigration to the West, and Texas and Mexico. He then made an important distinction between a historical anecdote and an event, stressing that only the latter has a consequence and is therefore significant. He noted that the paintings of Weir and Chapman in the Rotunda depicted anecdotes, since the Pilgrims' embarkation (as opposed to their landing) and the baptism of Pocahontas had no consequence per se. While he did not like Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence*, he thought it important as "a true illustration of an event." In the next sentence, however, he stated, "I wish he had painted the reading of the Declaration from the window of the Phila. St. House." This comment would not in itself be of much interest, if it were not that Brumidi actually did include this unusual subject in his sketch for the frieze. And this, along with the fact that nine of the nineteen known events Brumidi planned to depict are mentioned in Leutze's list, strongly suggest that Meigs showed this letter to Brumidi.

An analysis of the sketch for the frieze and a reconstruction of its fragments to form a complete number sequence reveal what was apparently Brumidi's original sequence of twenty events.¹³ The table to the left keys these, with the numbers and titles of the scenes as Brumidi inscribed them, to the diagrams in figures 10–8 and 10–9.

While this reconstruction of Brumidi's original frieze provides a plausible picture of his original intentions, it is difficult to integrate into the overall iconography of the Rotunda. Unlike his sketches for the canopy, which, as we have seen, display a clear development, this sketch did not go through such a process. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern some general patterns of relationship between the sketch and the rest of the art in the Rotunda.

In general the scenes to the west (1 through 6 and 16 through 20), over the Trumbulls and beneath the goddesses in the dome, represent images of war, conquest, rebellion, and death. Those to the east (8 through 15), over the later historical murals and beneath the gods, represent (though not consistently) images of peace, progress, and enlightenment. More specifically, one can find conceptual if not precise symbolic relationships between events in the frieze and the murals and reliefs below.

Thus, on the west, the flanking scenes of Columbus and the 1848 Gold Rush (1 and 20) are events very much oriented to the literal West, the former having gone west to find the Indies of the east, the prospectors having done so to find gold in California. Similarly, the next contiguous scenes both relate to Mexico, and are "western" if the geographic relationship to the first colonies is considered. On the north, in the original of Brumidi's sketches, Plains Indians would have hunted buffalo (6) over the relief of Penn's treaty with the forest Indians (3)—the Native Americans being a source of infinite mystery and danger for the



Fig. 10–11. “De Soto’s Burial in the Mississippi River.”

Brumidi apparently planned to have the more horizontal compositions over doorways to relate the frieze to its architectural setting. Architect of the Capitol.

colonists, and thus placed appropriately (for the time’s thinking) to the lightless direction. Similarly, on the south, Lewis and Clark (16) would have been seen over their illustrious predecessor Daniel Boone (7). On the east the colonization of New England (11) would have been over the landing of the Pilgrims (5), and all the flanking scenes depict events that took place “to the east” geographically.

Curious discrepancies and duplications of imagery, not to mention historical gaps, remain. The most obvious is the omission of any events between the start of the War of 1812 and the conquest of Mexico in 1847. Perhaps, from the point of view of Brumidi’s patrons, there was nothing much to idealize from the burning of Washington, through the Age of Jackson, to the years tense with dispute over slavery. The fresh conquest of Mexico and the thrilling discovery of gold which laid claim to the last continental frontier were perhaps felt more suitable for depiction. And when the aged artist finally began to paint his frieze well after the Civil War, there was no one about who cared much to help with an updating, and he may well have forgotten or put aside his original intentions, in order to get something of his conception in place.

It is interesting to compare the canopy fresco with the frieze. The canopy was painted with great attention to detail because he knew it would be seen at close range from the balcony around the eye of the dome as well as from below. He was thus careful to create there a series of striking silhouettes against the sun-filled aura, so the detailed images can also be read from a distance. The frieze, however, would be seen only from afar—either from 60 or so

feet below or across the 96.7-foot width of the Rotunda by those climbing to the dome. His brushwork was therefore quite free—just enough detail to be visually legible but not enough to obscure the forms with busy work.

Brumidi was not only an artist who could see the whole situation of a wall and paint it accordingly; he was also an aging master of his craft for whom the essence of a form was more important than any detail, something his successor, Costaggini, had not mastered.

Moreover, the reconstruction indicates that Brumidi’s original conception of the frieze attempted to create a formal as well as an iconographic unity with its environment. It would appear that he was trying to arrange the sequence of events so that those with a predominantly horizontal composition, such as the burial of de Soto (5) (fig. 10–11), would fall over the north and south doors, while those with a dominant triangular structure, such as the allegory of America and History (1) and the colonization of New England (11) would crown the east and west doors. When he discovered that the panels were falling out shorter than he had intended, he seems to have experimented with new scenes, such as that of Lewis and Clark (16) (fig. 10–12).¹⁴ This arrangement would have subtly distinguished the front and back from the sides of the confusingly circular Rotunda, broken the relentless verticality of the rest of the scenes, and given a pleasing rhythm to the whole design.

Brumidi’s death prevented this aesthetic unity from being realized. But it is justifiable to read his inscription in the canopy fresco—“from the many, one”—as pertaining to his artistic ambitions in this great chamber as much as it may have expressed the political sentiments and goals of his patrons. That his grand design for the Rotunda was



Fig. 10–12. “Lewis and Clark.” *This scene was at some point cut out of the scroll of sketches for the frieze. Architect of the Capitol.*

left incomplete and is now obscured by the works of others does not subtract from the genius that made the attempt to bring a sense of aesthetic and symbolic unity to this central space of our national Union.

Author’s Acknowledgment

I want to thank the U.S. Capitol Historical Society and Dr. Barbara Wolanin, Curator for the Architect of the Capitol, for the 1987 fellowship which enabled me to use the Records of the Architect of the Capitol (hereafter AOC) and to study Brumidi’s murals—many from the scaffold of Bernard Rabin, who has crowned his career as a restorer by bringing Brumidi’s great walls back to life.

The material in this essay is excerpted from my book in progress, *The Mural in America: A History of Wall Painting from Native American Times to Postmodernism*, and, where not specifically documented, is taken from Charles E. Fairman, *Art and Artists of the Capitol of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1927); The Architect of the Capitol, *Art in the United States Capitol* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976); and Myrtle Cheney Murdock, *Constantino Brumidi: Michelangelo of the United States Capitol* (Washington, D.C.: Monumental Press, 1950).

Notes to Chapter 10

1. It is unclear whether the dome itself was completed in defiance of the Confederacy or because the contractors faced a substantial loss if the vast quantity of cast-iron dome elements already delivered to the Capitol grounds were not put into place. William Allen, Architectural Historian for the Architect of the Capitol, believes that the latter was the case, and that President Lincoln simply made political hay out of economic necessity (unpublished lecture, March 16, 1990) (see chapter 4). There is also evidence that the canopy was painted with similar practicalities in mind, since it had to be executed while the scaffold used to erect the dome was still in place. TUV to CB, August 18, 1862 and B. B. French to secretary of the interior, May 4, 1863 AOC/LB. None of this, however, takes away from the patriotic sentiment that helped to inspire the artist in his subject and the Union to victory.

2. There were certainly other muralists, but most of them worked for decorating firms and few had opportunities for large-scale public commissions. One exception, notable because his work was known to Meigs, was Nicola Monachesi (1795–1851), whose 1834 murals in the dome of the Philadelphia Exchange are probably among the first true frescoes painted in this country. See Agnes Addison Gilchrist, “The Philadelphia Exchange: William Strickland, Architect,” in *Historic Philadelphia from the Founding until the Early Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1953), pp. 86–95, and MCM to Gouverneur Kemble, April 24, 1854, AOC/LB, and Francis V. O’Connor, “A History of Painting in True Fresco in the United States: 1825 to 1845,” in *Fresco: A Contemporary Perspective* (New York: Snug Harbor Cultural Center, [1994]), pp. 3–10.

3. Brumidi presided over what can be called an atelier (see chapter 6), and there is some evidence that Meigs encouraged this. For instance, John Durand understood from Meigs that Brumidi was willing to take pupils in fresco. Durand to MCM, January 31, 1857, AOC/CO.

The nature of the atelier was complex. Existing payroll records (AOC/CO) would seem to suggest that it was flourishing between 1856, when Brumidi had established himself as the premier fresco painter, and 1861, when Meigs's departure and the onset of the Civil War brought most artistic activity to a halt. During that time about eighty people were employed at the Capitol. There were roughly fifty-five "decorative" painters and twenty-five "fresco" painters, with occasional overlaps of responsibility. One gathers, however, from a number of sources, most notably from a letter from Brumidi to Meigs, that those engaged in fresco painting resented being assigned decorative tasks, CB to MCM, December 10, 1858, AOC/CO. Within this atelier Brumidi maintained pride of place, and his written communications suggest he brooked no interference from his colleagues.

4. See: Kent Ahrens, "Constantino Brumidi's 'Apotheosis of Washington' in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol," in *Records of the Columbia Historical Society of Washington, D.C., 1973-1974* (Washington, D.C.: Columbia Historical Society, 1976), pp. 187-208; see p. 196 for the dating.

5. The author discovered this long-lost work, known in an 1866 copy-right photograph, in a private collection in Honolulu during a research trip in 1987. Given the closeness of its details to the finished mural, there is a slight possibility that this sketch is not so much a *modello* as a *ricordo*, in that it could have been painted after the dome was completed so that the full design could be copyrighted. This is suggested by Brumidi's letter of September 8, 1862, to Thomas U. Walter, in which he submitted his design for the dome. His description of the six allegories and the figure of Washington fits the finished work in every detail except when he says that the latter will be "surrounded by . . . figures of eminent men of the times of Washington, which latter will be likenesses," AOC/CO. More likely is the possibility that at this time a now lost oil study still included other figures around Washington in the manner of that at the Athenaeum and that the one in Honolulu is later and records Brumidi's final conception, developed while working in the dome.

6. Brumidi submitted the third sketch, or one very similar to it (see note 5), to Walter three weeks after it was requested in the fall of 1862 (indicating he was well prepared for the request). It was later approved by the secretary of the interior, and Congress appropriated the necessary funds that winter. Brumidi was authorized to proceed with the preparatory work on March 11, 1863. Later that spring, however, a new secretary of the interior questioned the commission and stopped payments. It was necessary to establish that a frescoed dome was included in Walter's original plans, and it is possible that Brumidi added a sketch to Walter's rendering at this time to support that correct contention. (While this is probably not the first doctored document in the U.S. Government's history, it could well be the first which involved a painting after the fact.)

7. In 1979 Curator for the Architect of the Capitol David Sellin, in the process of restoration of the Rotunda canvases, switched the positions of Weir's *Embarkation of the Pilgrims* (E) and Powell's *Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto* (G). He did this to create a better aesthetic balance across the wall comparable to that of the four Trumbull paintings opposite. (Verbal communication, March 16, 1990.) The switch destroyed the relationships Brumidi made between the history paintings, his allegories in the canopy, and the historical scenes in the frieze.

8. The four large paintings on revolutionary themes on the west were commissioned from John Trumbull in 1817 and placed between 1819 and 1824. On the Trumbull paintings, see Irma B. Jaffe, *John Trumbull: Patriot-Artist of the American Revolution* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), and, on the later historical murals, Kent Ahrens, "Nineteenth Century History Painting and the United States Capitol," pp. 191-222. Con-

cerning the relationship of the historical murals to the environment of the Rotunda, it should be remembered that the original dome of the Capitol, designed by Charles Bulfinch, was modeled on that of the Roman Pantheon, and consisted of an interior hemisphere with an oculus made of a collar of stone. This was surmounted by a somewhat more elongated and quite ill-proportioned exterior dome constructed of copper-clad wood, which the architect was required to erect against his wishes to make the profile of the building more prominent. Thus the interior of the Rotunda was capped by a low dome, and the artists who painted the eight history paintings designed their works for a far more intimate space than exists today.

9. For a discussion of the sculptures, see Vivien Green Fryd, "The Italian Presence in the United States Capitol," in Irma Jaffe, ed., *The Italian Presence in American Art, 1760-1860* (New York and Rome: Fordham University Press and Istituto della enciclopedia Italiana, 1989), pp. 132-149.

10. When Filippo Costaggini completed Brumidi's frieze from his measured sketch in the late 1880s, there remained over 30 feet to go—a gap usually attributed to Costaggini's ambition to add a few scenes of his own design. Recent careful measurements of the frieze during restoration suggest another explanation, as Barbara Wolanin points out in chapter 11. This is most visible in the fact that the burial of de Soto is just to the left of the north door, rather than directly over it, as the reconstructed sketch would suggest was Brumidi's original intention. This proportional compression, which was continued by Costaggini, along with the fact that the frieze is actually about 303.5 feet long, created the gap.

11. *Report of the Architect of the Capitol*, November 16, 1855, pp. 117-118.

12. Leutze to MCM, February 8, 1857, AOC/CO.

13. Brumidi's 30-foot-long scroll sketch for the frieze was discovered in a scroll of pasted-together sheets used by him and his successor, Costaggini. Two other fragments, depicting a tipi with Indians hunting buffalo, and Lewis and Clark (fig. 10-10, numbers 6 and 16) can be shown to fit into the sequence, and one panel is missing (fig. 10-10, number 7). See the composite views in figure 10-10 and frieze foldout to compare the frieze as completed with Brumidi's original intention for it. I want to thank Barbara Wolanin for first pointing out the tipi peg to the lower right of scene 5 (numbered 4 in the sketch), which placed the hunting scene following.

14. As can be seen in figure 10-10, scenes 1, 6, 11, and 16 would have fallen respectively over the west, north, east, and south doors. Scene 1, "America and History," has a decidedly triangular composition, as does scene 11, "Colonization of New England." The fifth, "De Soto's Burial in the Mississippi," is a decidedly horizontal design. It can be conjectured that, when Brumidi discovered that the last would not reach the area over the door, he experimented with the triangular tipi motif for that position, balanced by the succeeding horizontal hunting scene. Similarly, at the sixteenth panel, *Lewis and Clark*, he seems to have tried reversing this sequence of design motifs, with the horizontal bear falling over the door, flanked by the horse and rider to the left and the figures around the boat to the right. Also, these two additions (numbers 6 and 16) appear to be drawn in a looser style than the rest of the scenes, and that may indicate that they date from the late 1870s, well after the original sketch. These, along with the missing scene 7, were probably all added in an attempt to correct the growing discrepancy in the length of the frieze. (See, however, Barbara Wolanin, "Constantino Brumidi's Frescoes in the United States Capitol," in Irma B. Jaffe, ed., *The Italian Presence in American Art: 1760-1860*, pp. 153-155 and note 16, where it is argued that these additions were discarded c. 1859.) It is unclear when or why they were abandoned, but a possible reason is that Brumidi or those advising him came to see that they represented what Leutze had called "anecdotes," rather than consequential historic events.