



CHAPTER 8

“Gems of the Capitol”

Despite the atmosphere of political controversy and disruptions, the years between 1857 and 1860 were among Brumidi’s most productive, in terms of both design and execution. He painted frescoes in several important rooms and completed the decoration of the President’s Room, which has always been considered “one of the gems of the Capitol.”¹ During this period he and Meigs laid out the plan for all of the Capitol murals. By 1859, Brumidi had designed virtually all of the murals he would paint at the Capitol through the end of his life.

Under the direction of Thomas U. Walter and W. B. Franklin, work moved forward as funds were available. Brumidi continued to work in a number of rooms at once. The execution of the designs proceeded with stops and starts, at some points because of lack of money for supplies. Sometimes there were long intervals between campaigns. Given the many interruptions in carrying out these projects, it is surprising how great a sense of unity Brumidi was able to create.

A long-standing misconception to be dispelled about Brumidi’s working methods is that he deliberately left blank areas so that future events could be depicted. On the



Fig. 8–2. Design for Ceiling of Senate Library. Brumidi worked out the details for the ceiling room, now S–211, in his 1857 pencil sketch. However, before the fresco was completed, the room had changed function, and “Print” and “Philosophy” were not used. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Photo: Library of Congress.

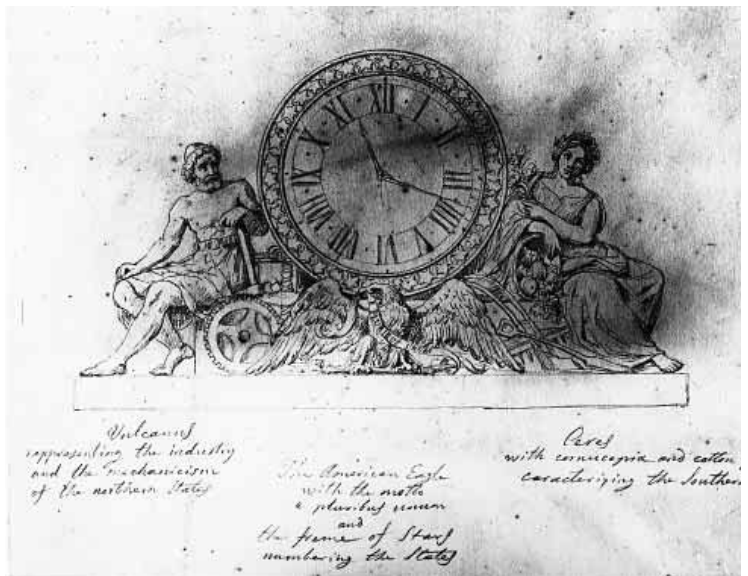
contrary, as has been seen in the case of the Naval Affairs Committee room (S–127) and as will be seen in this chapter, Brumidi made designs for these areas; they were left unexecuted only because of financial and time constraints. The artist struggled for decades to convince those in charge to allow him to finish his planned decorations.

Brumidi’s role in decorating the Senate Chamber was limited, for Walter stopped the gilding that he had started

there. The senators preferred a meeting chamber much more sober in design than that of the House, but they apparently appreciated Brumidi’s elaborate designs for other rooms in their new wing (figs. 8–1 and 8–2). Walter’s November 1859 cost estimate, “made in consultation with Mr. Brumidi,” and his February 1860 notes for the United States Art Commission listing all expenditures on “works of art and art decoration,” are valuable documentation of the murals in progress at the time.² They show that Brumidi was working on an impressive number of projects, including making a design for bronze stair railings, advising on furniture colors for the Senate Chamber, and designing a never-realized sculptural clock for the Senate Chamber (fig. 8–3). He was designing or executing frescoes in the Stationery Room (S–210) (see fig. 6–14), the Senate Post Office (S–211), the President’s Room (S–216), the committee room for Military Affairs (S–128), and the Senate Reception Room (S–213). He was also involved in never-executed designs for the Post

Fig. 8–1. Room intended for the Senate Library. On the ceiling, Brumidi depicted fields of knowledge set in an illusionistic frame, with life-like groups of figures on pedestals in the corners. S–211.

Fig. 8-3. Proposal for a clock for the Senate Chamber, c. 1859. Brumidi's unrealized design included bronze figures of Vulcan, representing, in the artist's words, "the industry and the mechanism of the northern States," and Ceres, "with cornucopia and cotton flowers characterizing [sic] the Southern States." Montgomery C. Meigs Photo Album, Architect of the Capitol.



Office Committee room (S-117), the Indian Affairs Committee room (S-132), and the Ladies Waiting Room, now part of the third-floor Senate Press Gallery (S-313A). In 1859, the work remaining for the Senate first-floor corridors was so extensive that an estimate of \$20,000 was given to finish them, including the frescoes.

S-211

For the decoration of the room intended for the Senate Library, now the Lyndon B. Johnson Room, Captain Meigs envisioned "groups of history, legislation, etc.," commenting in 1857, "I hope to make this a beautiful room."³ Brumidi completed the rich and harmonious decorative scheme representing fields of knowledge only after ten years and several interruptions (see fig. 8-1).

Brumidi submitted a design for the ceiling to Meigs on February 16, 1857, which depicted *Print* and *Philosophy* along with the *Geography* and *History* that he later executed (see fig. 8-2). He later painted detailed oil sketches for the lunettes. He decided to create semicircular fields imitating framed paintings, with groups of figures in the corners that appear to support the weight of the ceiling.⁴ Meigs asked Johannes Oertel to prepare designs for the room, but judged his figures too large for the space, and diverted him to another assignment. Oertel was later dismayed to find that Brumidi had begun his own frescoes. By the spring of 1858, Brumidi had finished the lunette *Geography* and one corner group, and Camillo Bischoff, one of his Italian assistants, had painted the decorative borders.⁵ By the time the Senate moved into the new extension in 1859 the room had become the Senate Post Office, containing a glass-and-walnut post office with a box for each senator.⁶

In 1862, Brumidi submitted estimates for completing the still unfinished room, but no action was taken. In 1866, at the urging of the chairman of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark asked the artist to submit new estimates. Clark thought that Brumidi's figure of \$2,000 per ceiling panel was "unreasonably high," and the artist agreed to perform the work at his earlier rate of \$1,500. He also agreed to paint the remaining three-quarters of the ceil-

ing for a total of \$4,989 under protest, claiming that his proposed fees were very reasonable in comparison with the \$20,000 paid in 1862 to Emanuel Leutze for his mural *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* in the House stairway. With the help of Alberto Peruchi and Urban Geier in preparing cartoons and mixing colors, Brumidi finally completed the ceiling in 1867.⁷

The center of the ceiling contains a trompe l'oeil medallion of acanthus leaves with striped shields in the corners. Borders of morning glories on dark red fields encircle the four lunettes. In the corners are groups of three figures, the central one a canephore, a figure holding a basket of flowers on its head (fig. 8-4). Visually, they function as caryatids, figures used as columns supporting architectural weight. Although Brumidi once described them as the "months of the year," significant differences among the individual figures are not apparent, with the exception of the group of three males wearing wreaths of laurel, flowers, and wheat.⁸ The male group was undoubtedly the one painted in 1858; the style is more delicate, the musculature more detailed, and the modeling of light and dark more subtle than in the figures in the other corners. The three female groups vary in their poses. With their arms intertwined, gazing out to the viewer, they recall the classical Three Graces. Overall, they express abundance and growth. Eagles rest at the feet of each group, flanking the elaborately decorated pedestal on which the figures stand.

The four ceiling lunettes contain scenes focusing on female allegorical figures. Each is composed within the lunette like an easel painting; the figures do not project illusionistically into the viewer's space.

Geography, sitting on clouds, leans over as if to look out over the world (fig. 8-5). She wears a richly brocaded



Fig. 8-4. Corner figure groups. *The group of three male figures undoubtedly dates from 1858 because it is next to the first lunette Brumidi completed and is painted in more detail than the female groups in the other corners. S-211.*



Fig. 8-5. Geography. *The central figure points to a globe with a pair of dividers. One of her winged assistants spreads out a map of the New World, while the other holds a protractor and a miniature locomotive. S-211.*





Fig. 8–6. History. *The figure representing History, crowned with the laurel wreath of fame, records the story of the Revolutionary War battle raging in the distance. Her book is propped against Father Time. S–211.*

skirt and a headdress with a strap around her forehead and under her chin. A similar figure appears in an engraving that belonged to Brumidi of a ceiling at Versailles (see fig. 1–14). *History* is depicted with an oil lamp, inkpot and quills, and documents on a pedestal table; a framed picture, a cylindrical box with scrolls, and a printing press are on the ground beside her (fig. 8–6). By her knees sits *Father Time*, an old man with wings who holds an hourglass; next to him is his sickle. The chipped empty stone pedestal behind him also suggests the passage of time, as well as the transitory nature of fame.

The fresco *Telegraph* may relate to the function of the room as the Senate Post Office (fig. 8–7). It closely follows Brumidi’s oil sketch, *Telegraph [America Welcoming Europe: The Completion of the Laying of the Transatlantic Cable]* (fig. 8–8).⁹ *Europa*, at the left, sits astride a bull (the form in which *Jupiter*, the king of the gods, disguised himself). She shakes hands with *America*, who sits at the edge of the sea, while a cherub holds the telegraph cable laid between England and America in 1866. *America* wears a phrygian, or liberty, cap wreathed with the oak leaves of strength, and chest armor for protection. She holds the caduceus, the symbol of *Mercury*, god of commerce, and leans on an anchor. Next to her are an

eagle bearing an olive branch of peace, a flag, ramrods, and a cannon, on which lies a cornucopia of fruit. The objects amassed around the symbol of the New World on the shore give her greater weight and importance in the composition than the figure of *Europa* in the water.

In the scene entitled *Physics* (fig. 8–9), Brumidi shows how the science has been applied to creating new modes of transportation. *Physics* is seated, resting one elbow on a pedestal, examining a chart; to her right stands a boy in a sailor suit. Next to her is a plane table, an instrument on a tripod used for plotting survey lines. Behind the group are a paddle-wheel steamboat and steam locomotive crossing a bridge, as seen in Brumidi’s 1853 painting *Progress* (see fig. 5–4). A blacksmith, whose muscular back is turned to the viewer, holds a hammer; beside him are an anvil and iron locomotive wheels he has made.

The wall lunettes are decorated with shields and rinceaux. The lower wall panels, defined by illusionistic moldings, were originally decorated with a damask pattern of shields and trompe l’oeil marble relief. The lower walls are finished with scagliola.

The room served as the Senate Post Office until 1869, when it became the meeting place for the District of Columbia Committee. In 1958 it was assigned to Majority



Fig. 8-7. *Telegraph.* Figures symbolizing Europe and America shake hands, representing the bringing together of the continents by telegraphic communication after the laying of the transatlantic cable. S-211.



Fig. 8-8. Sketch for *Telegraph*, c. 1862. Brumidi followed this oil sketch when he painted the fresco *Telegraph*, changing only minor details. United States Senate Collection.
Photo: Senate Curator.



Fig. 8-9. *Physics.* Wearing a wreath and a cape trimmed with stars, Physics studies a long scroll, at which a boy dressed as a sailor points. One of Vulcan's blacksmiths sits on the right; a steamship and steam locomotive appear prominently in the background. S-211.



Fig. 8–10. Room designed for the Senate Military Affairs Committee. *The theme of the decoration is the American Revolution. Brumidi contributed the overall design and the frescoes, and James Leslie painted the trophy panels. S-128.*

Leader and later Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, after whom it was named in 1964. In recent years, the room has been used for Senate meetings such as party caucuses and conferences.

Repairs to the decoration were made in 1900 and 1901. In 1947, the frescoes may have been cleaned and coated with “mastic, a type of varnish.”¹⁰ The wall panels have been painted over in solid color. Some features, such as the gilded mirror and valances, were renovated in 1988. The murals have not yet received conservation treatment because they are in relatively good condition.

S-128

The room originally designed for the Senate Committee on Military Affairs and Militia was decorated over a span of fifteen years (fig. 8–10). In 1856, Meigs was advised by the illustrator Felix O. C. Darley: “The best subjects for the room of the Committee on Military Affairs would be scenes from the Revolution when Washington or his principal generals could be introduced, such as the Storming of Stony Point, the Battle of Trenton, &c.” Although Darley expressed willingness to prepare designs in ink, he said that Meigs needed a fresco painter to execute them.¹¹ There is no evidence that Darley actually sent sketches to Meigs. In late 1857, Emmerich Carstens wrote to Meigs that “the work to be done on the walls of the Military Committee room can only be done by Mr. Brumidi himself and by Mr. Leslie who is at work now on the pannels [*sic*] to paint the arms. . . .”¹² Leslie finished the trophies by the end of 1857.¹³ Brumidi apparently began working after Leslie had completed his part. Early in the next year, before Brumidi started his frescoes, Camillo Bisco painted the perspective frames around the lunettes.¹⁴

Brumidi first prepared small oil sketches for the frescoed lunettes (fig. 8–11). In 1858, he frescoed two scenes, *Battle of Lexington* and *Death of General Wooster, 1777*, but because the committee, then under the chairmanship of Jefferson Davis, wanted to use the room, he was not able to complete the other three. He had prepared oil sketches for four additional scenes, of which only *Storming of Stony Point, 1779* was executed later. In the frescoes he executed, he closely followed the oil sketches, making only slight compositional adjustments. The three scenes that were not executed are entitled on the oil sketches “General Mercer’s death by bayonet stroke,” “Death of General Montgomery,” and “The Americans at Sagg [*sic*] Harbour, burned twelve brigs and sloops and [*illegible*] with him many prisoners.”

In 1871, Senator Henry Wilson, who had been chairman of the committee during the Civil War, requested that the decoration of the room be completed while Brumidi was still alive. He wrote to Edward Clark, “It has occurred to me that it is quite desirable to employ the same artist. . . . Mr. Brumidi is getting old.”¹⁵ Wilson was consulted about the subjects for the last three lunettes, and two new subjects were executed: *The Boston Massacre, 1770* and *Washington at Valley Forge, 1778*; oil sketches for these have not been located. Brumidi, then in New York, heard that there would be a congressional recess and expressed eagerness to get to work. In October 1871 he was paid \$1,000 for each lunette plus \$100 for each of three groups of children over the doorways.¹⁶ Other small paintings on the ceiling were added later.

As completed, the room is ornately decorated with scenes and details related to the Revolutionary War. The ceiling contains shields; emblems of war and peace, such as wreaths of victory, weapons, and fasces; and small grisaille illusionistic sculptural groups with historic scenes depicting subjects such as the “Death of General Montgomery” (fig. 8–12), the “Boston Tea Party,” and the “Surrender of Cornwallis.” Several of the compositions were derived from unused lunette designs or from scenes sketched for the frieze, including “Colonel Johnson and Tecumseh.” Gold leaf applied under intricate rinceaux and diamond patterns in the pendentives creates a rich, mosaic-like effect.

Brumidi’s five frescoed lunettes are the focal points of the room. His compositions work effectively in the lunette shape, with the main figures at the center, balanced by landscapes or groups of figures in the corners. On the south wall, over the door into S–129, is one of the lunettes painted in 1858, *The Battle of Lexington* (fig. 8–13). Brumidi created a sense of the tumult and noise of the battle by effective use of diagonal lines and swirling smoke, closely following his oil sketch (see fig. 8–11).

To the left of the door is *Washington at Valley Forge, 1778* (fig. 8–14). This scene, one of those Brumidi painted in 1871, is the most quietly dramatic; only the blowing capes and scarf appear to be in motion. Brumidi’s technique of using thick paint, or *impasto*, is very visible in the snow.

The west wall is filled with ornate gilded valances and the mirror over the marble mantel. The mirror frame, specially made for this room in 1859, contains images of military equipment such as drums and muskets.¹⁷

Over the north wall is *The Boston Massacre, 1770* (fig. 8–15). Brumidi based the scene on Paul Revere’s famous engraving of the event in which British soldiers fired on a mob of citizens in front of the Old State House (fig.



Fig. 8–11. Oil sketches for *Death of General Montgomery* and *The Battle of Lexington*. Brumidi created these compositions for lunettes in the Military Affairs Committee room. Only the lower scene was executed in fresco. Collection of Edna W. Macomb. Photo: Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State.

8–16). He changed the composition, however, and depicted an earlier point in the event to emphasize the heroism of Crispus Attucks, an escaped slave, by making him the central figure. This may be because Brumidi painted this lunette during the Reconstruction period. As in Renaissance altarpieces, the curved pediment over the doorway of the Old State House suggests a halo over the martyr’s head. At the left, closely based on Revere’s print, are two of the other victims. Brumidi also included men throwing snowballs, representing the Boston boys who taunted the British soldiers. Brumidi’s symmetrical composition is more static and stiff than those he had designed earlier for the room.

Death of General Wooster, 1777 (fig. 8–17) is inscribed on the oil sketch, “General Wooster at Ridgefield mortally wounded is carried out of the field.” Brumidi composed the dying general, whose shoulder and arm are bare, like the body of Christ in a Renaissance Pietà. In this scene, Brumidi created a dramatic contrast between foreground and background spaces and a sense of a quiet, reverent moment in the midst of the battle.

Finally, over the door to the corridor is *Storming of Stony Point, 1779* (fig. 8–18). Brumidi inscribed his sketch “Storming at Stonypoint, General Wayne wounded in the head carried to the fort.” The battle at which “Mad Anthony” Wayne was wounded revived the spirits of the



Fig. 8-12. “Death of General Montgomery.” One of eight small scenes painted on the ceiling to look like stone reliefs, this one is based on Brumidi’s unused oil sketch for a lunette. S-128.

Fig. 8-13. *The Battle of Lexington.* At the center of the composition is a British officer on a rearing white horse, firing on the Minutemen to the left; this event on April 19, 1775, marked the beginning of the War of American Independence. S-128.



Fig. 8-14. *Washington at Valley Forge, 1778.* General Washington is shown with his officers standing on a snowy incline, while his troops huddle around a fire at the left. The bare branches emphasize the sense of cold and suffering. S-128.



Fig. 8-15. *The Boston Massacre, 1770.* Brumidi depicted Crispus Attucks in the moment just before he was fatally shot by the British Captain Thomas Preston. Attucks is shown raising his only weapon, a piece of firewood, and grasping the barrel of a soldier's musket. S-128.



Fig. 8-16. Paul Revere, *The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5th 1770, by a party of the 29th Regt.* Brumidi used many engravings in creating images for the Capitol. As in this case, he often rearranged the compositions. Library of Congress.

Continental Army and prevented the British from dividing New England from the rest of the colonies. The composition is tripartite, with the fort on the left, and the British and American flags used to add color and drama.

Under four of the lunettes are illusionistic plaques holding the title of the scene, flanked by cherubs with garlands of flowers. Plain panels, probably originally blue but now dark green, framed with leafy designs fill the walls.

On the pilasters are six intricately detailed trophies of arms painted by James Leslie, with specific military implements of various historical periods, shields of the United States, and military medals. Each trophy contains different objects, among them George Washington's sword in the panel on the north central pilaster (fig. 8-19).

This room did not receive the negative criticism that its neighbor, the Naval Affairs Committee room (S-127), did, since its themes are so clearly American. In his eulogy for Brumidi, Senator Daniel Voorhees praised the decorations, asking the rhetorical question: "Who ever passed through the room of the Committee on Military Affairs without feeling that the very genius of heroism had left there its immortal aspirations?"¹⁸



Fig. 8-17. Death of General Wooster, 1777. This event followed the burning of the unprotected town of Danbury, Connecticut, by British troops. The American leader of the Continental Army, General David Wooster, was mortally wounded during the counterattack. S-128.



Fig. 8-18. Storming of Stony Point, 1779. General “Mad Anthony” Wayne had made a daring midnight raid on the British garrison overlooking the Hudson River and captured enemy ammunition and supplies. He is shown with his head bandaged, being carried victoriously by his soldiers. S-128.



Fig. 8-19. Trophy panel by James Leslie. This is one of six different illusionistic groupings of weapons and accoutrements of war painted by the English artist in convincing detail. S-128.

The room was used by the Military Affairs Committee until it was assigned to the Appropriations Committee in 1911. Recorded alterations to the decoration of the room include a cleaning and touching up by Charles Moberly in 1919, the channeling for air-conditioning ducts and addition of bookcases around 1936, and the dividing of the room in half with a wooden

partition in the 1940s. In 1979 the room was returned to more of its original appearance by the removal of the partition and bookshelves, the camouflaging of the ducts, Cliff Young’s cleaning and repair of the lunettes, and the retouching of the ceiling. The murals await more extensive professional cleaning and conservation.



Fig. 8-20. North end of the Senate Reception Room. *This end of the room, dominated by the allegorical figures in the vaults, has been cleaned of the dark coatings and overpaint that obscured Brumidi's delicate color scheme. S-213.*



Fig. 8–21. Sketch for Senate Reception Room. *Brumidi eventually painted three of the vaults as he planned in this oil sketch, changing only the figure of Peace.* Estate of Edna W. Maccomb.

Photo: Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State.

S-213

The Senate Reception Room is one of the rooms decorated by Brumidi that still serves its original purpose, that is, as a place where senators meet constituents; this was an especially useful function in the decades before senators had offices (fig. 8–20). The room was first called “the antechamber of the Senate,” the “Receiving Room of the Senate,” and later in the nineteenth century, the “Ladies Reception Room.” The history of this room is unusual because of the way the iconographical program for the wall lunettes changed over time (although only one was ever completed), while the subjects of the allegorical figures, including the Virtues in the ceiling, were modified only slightly.

Brumidi began preparing designs for this room even before the House Committee on Agriculture room was finished. In December 1855, Meigs reported: “Brumidi brought me a design sketch in pencil for the decoration of the Senate anteroom. It is beautiful. He is full of innovation, and this, if worked up with skill, will make a beautiful room.”¹⁹ Brumidi wrote a detailed outline of his pro-

gram for the room in French in late 1855 or early 1856. He described the subjects of the allegorical figures as well as five complex historical scenes, including the first meeting of Congress and the proclamation of independence to the American people.²⁰ By the end of July 1856, he had prepared oil sketches for three of the five historical scenes. Meigs also had him design an impressive mantel with a bronze figure.²¹ Little of this first comprehensive plan, approved by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, was executed.²² However, early in 1857 Ernest Thomas, foreman of ornamental plasterers, began the elaborate decorative plaster work, which was covered with burnished gilding by François Hugot; it was less than half done by the end of the year.²³ In 1858, Brumidi painted the frescoes in the four pendentives and the center of the dome and designed those for the groin vaults in the north part of the room.²⁴

In the 1860s, attention was again focused on the room. In 1862, Brumidi gave estimates to architect Thomas U. Walter for completing the decoration with five panels of

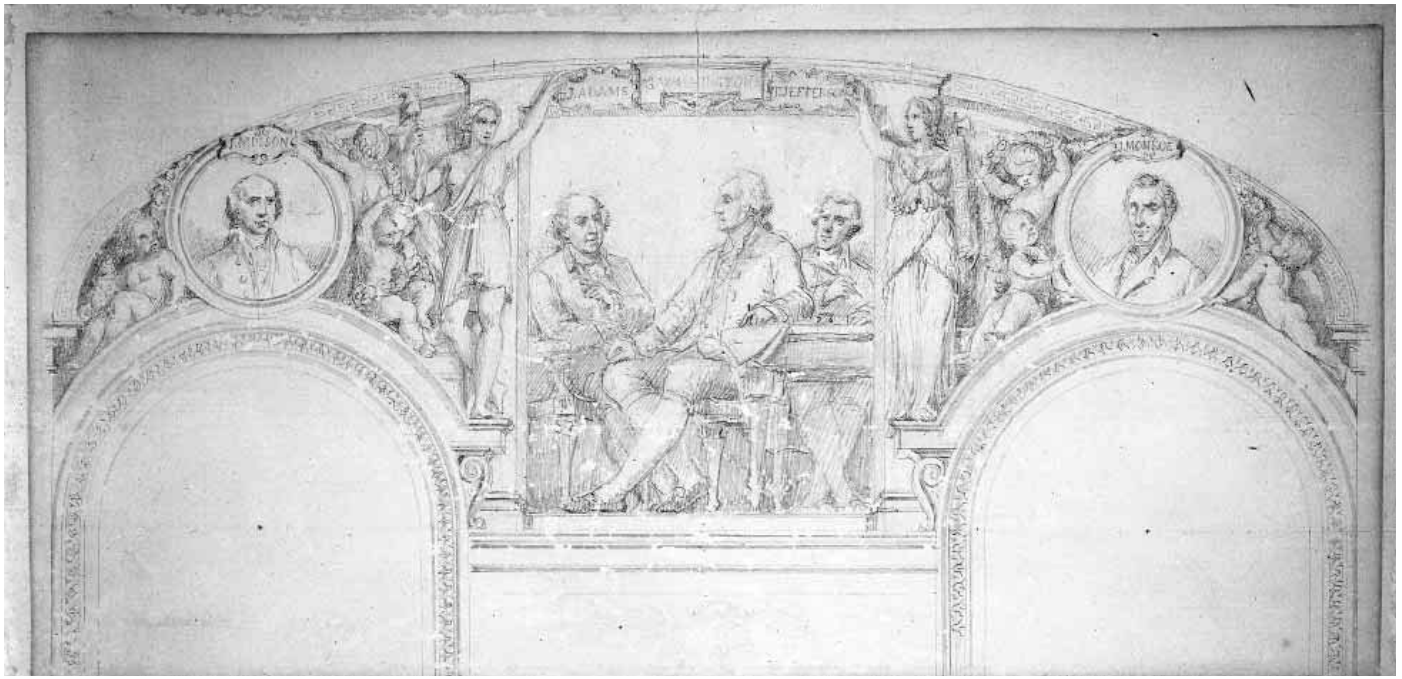


Fig. 8–22. Washington, Adams, Jefferson. This pencil sketch documents Brumidi’s intention to include portraits of all the early presidents in the Senate Reception Room. When this plan was dropped, Adams was replaced by Hamilton and the figures were rearranged. Arthur J. Phelan Collection.

historical scenes; four groin vaults with figures of War, Peace, Freedom, and Plenty, for which he had made oil sketches (fig. 8–21); and five portraits of illustrious men; however, no action was taken. In 1866 Senator B. Gratz Brown, chairman of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, wrote to the secretary of the interior, who had been given responsibility for the construction, to point out that the completion of rooms had been covered in the 1859 appropriation, and recommending that the reception room be finished; Brumidi then submitted new estimates. Not until 1869 did Brumidi paint the allegorical images in the four triangular fields of the north groin-vaulted ceiling.²⁵

Finally, in June 1870, Brumidi created new designs for the lunettes, with figures rendered in chiaroscuro, using darks and lights, in imitation of sculpture and portraits in color. Two extant pencil sketches for the lunettes, apparently dating from this time, show that Brumidi had changed the configuration and the subjects. Instead of multifigured scenes of historical events, he planned to incorporate portraits of the first sixteen presidents. One sketch shows Washington, Adams, and Jefferson seated together, flanked by rondels with portraits of Madison and Monroe (fig. 8–22). The other includes a seated John Quincy Adams, a rondel of Jackson, and a seated Van Buren (fig. 8–23). The portraits are framed by red curtains and illusionistic sculpture of maidens and cherubs. Brumidi

sent the designs to Clark for the inspection of Senator Charles Sumner, chairman of the powerful Foreign Relations Committee. In November 1870, Brumidi was paid for painting the chiaroscuro figures in the lunette of the south wall; he painted these in oil on dry plaster rather than in true fresco. A second lunette on the south end was finished by July, and the remaining three “panels with figures and medallions” were completed by November 1871. Clark reported that year: “The lunettes of the walls of the reception room of the Senate are being decorated in such a manner as to leave spaces for portraits. It is proposed to fill these with the portraits of men most conspicuous in our legislative history, and to have them painted by our most skillful artists, so as to have in the Capitol a specimen of the styles of the principal painters.”²⁶

In August 1872, the subject of the scene on the south wall was changed. Clark wrote to Brumidi that the committee had authorized him to have the murals painted and had ordered Brumidi to substitute Alexander Hamilton for Adams; “Then the picture would represent Washington and his two principal Cabinet Officers—Jefferson and Hamilton—whom he most consulted.” Brumidi prepared an oil sketch of this changed composition, and followed it closely when he executed it on the wall that year.²⁷ As late as 1876, Brumidi petitioned to be allowed to fill the remaining spaces, but to no avail, and the blank spaces remain today.

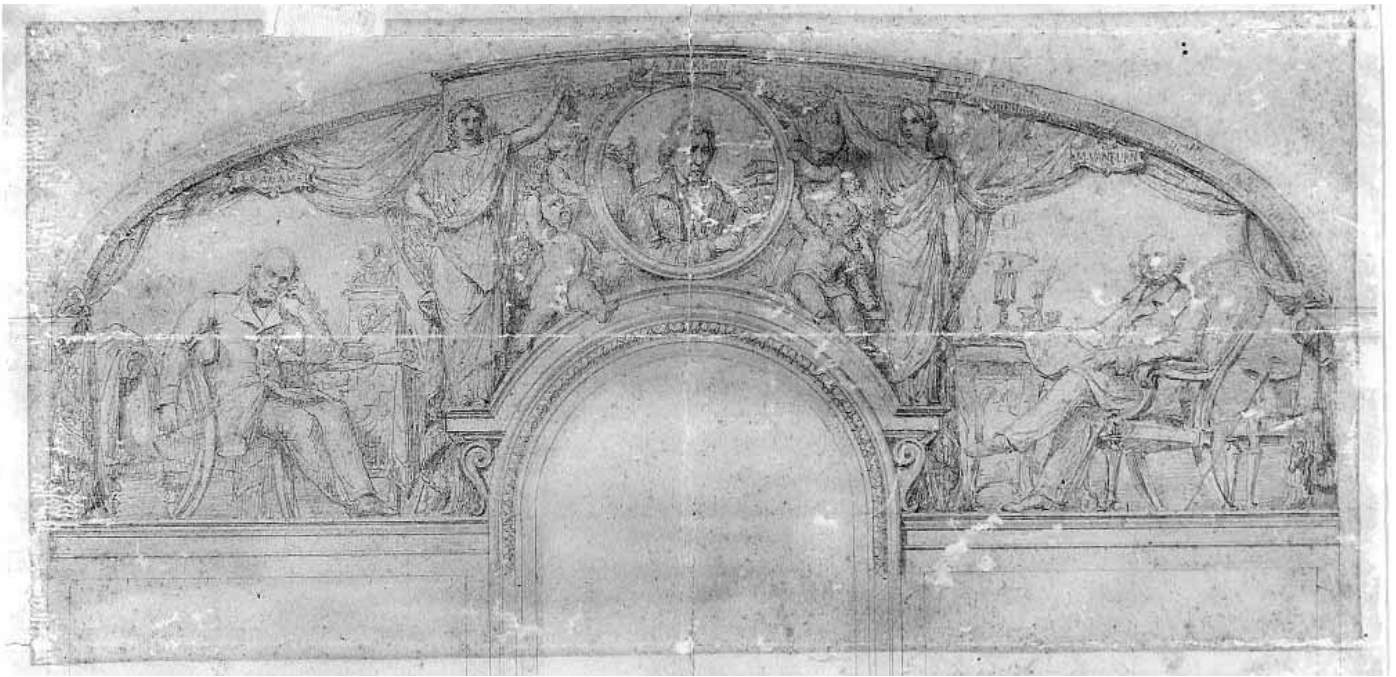


Fig. 8–23. *Adams, Jackson, Vanburn, c. 1870. The sketch, with Van Buren’s name misspelled, shows that the sixth, seventh, and eighth presidents were to have appeared over the door leading to the Senate Chamber. Architect of the Capitol.*



Fig. 8–24. *South end of the Senate Reception Room. The domed ceiling is decorated with gilded coffers and rosettes, with flying cherubs at the center. This photograph, taken before restoration was begun, shows the brownish coating that covered the murals. S–213.*

The ceiling nearest the entrance from the corridor is a dome filled with elaborate rosettes set in gilded coffers, which are graduated in size to enhance the three-dimensional illusion (fig. 8-24). In the central rondel, which originally held a gaudy chandelier, seven cherubs dance in

the air as if seen from below, trailing draperies of red, blue, and gold. Brumidi in French called these nude babies *genies* or geniuses, spirits symbolizing various ideas through the objects they hold. In Italian, he might have called them *putti*, or little boys.



Fig. 8-25. *Strength*, after and before restoration. The attributes of the Virtues are reinforced by objects held by the cherubs. Here, for example, the oak leaves represent strength and the fasces is a symbol of authority. S-213.



Fig. 8-26. *War*, one of the north ceiling vaults. War is portrayed by Minerva, goddess of wisdom and battle, flying across a landscape, brandishing a shield and sword, accompanied by a cherub riding on an eagle and holding the fasces. S-213.

In the pendentives of the dome Brumidi depicted the four cardinal virtues. Strength (or Fortitude) wears the lion’s skin and holds the club of Hercules (fig. 8–25). Prudence gazes into a mirror, while cherubs hold a snake, her other attribute, and a clay jar. Justice (or Jurisprudence) holds a tablet; she is being crowned with a laurel wreath by one winged cupid, while another holds out the scales of justice. Temperance touches a bridle, her signature attribute, and holds a palm frond; a winged cherub pours water from a pitcher into a jug of wine.²⁸

In the groin vault of the ceiling at the north end of the room are four frescoes by Brumidi, conceived as easel paintings bordered with gilded frames applied to the ceiling. War (fig. 8–26) wears a helmet encircled with stars and sprouting white and blue feathers, possibly a reflection of the headdress on Thomas Crawford’s Statue of Freedom. The figure nearest the window is Liberty in a red cap and robe; she holds the fasces and a scroll with the Constitution, supported by a cherub. Another cherub flies in from the left with olive branches of peace, and a third, to the right, holds the shield of the United States and one end of a banner inscribed “E Pluribus Unum;” the other end is held by the beak of an eagle. Underneath Liberty’s foot are the crown and scepter of royal power. Peace holds an olive branch in her right hand and instruments of art and architecture in her left hand: a triangle, compass, and paintbrushes. A cherub holds a lyre and trumpet on the left, and to the right another prepares to cast a shield of war down atop a discarded helmet and broken sword. Plenty holds a cornucopia and touches a plow, which is grouped with other agricultural implements. To the left are a locomotive and a cherub holding a caduceus, the symbol of Mercury and of Commerce. The cherub to the right flies in with blossoming branches. Many of the symbols depicted here can also be seen in the canopy in the Rotunda and in other rooms, such as the President’s Room.

The pilasters and archways near the entrance and at the center of the room hold illusionistic relief panels of classical and Native American heads, cherubs holding various symbolic implements, and birds (fig. 8–27).

In the four large lunettes over the doorways on the side walls, Brumidi created the illusion of classical maidens and cherubs sculpted in marble flanking a central rondel. The maidens pull back red curtains, but the portraits they were designed to frame were, unfortunately, never executed. In the south wall, however, Brumidi was allowed to paint a scene showing President Washington with his Secretary of



Fig. 8–27. Wall panel after restoration. *The panels painted in tempera appear to be made of carved stone, inset with medallions of alternating colors. Each cherub is a different infant god, here Mars, Neptune, and Mercury. S–213.*



Fig. 8–28. Lunette on south wall. *Brumidi's depiction of President Washington with Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton is the only historical scene he completed in the Senate Reception Room. S-213.*

State Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton (fig. 8–28). Washington is shown seated, in profile, across from Jefferson, while Hamilton stands behind, one hand on a stack of bills, the other resting on the turned chair back. The north wall is dominated by a lavishly carved marble mantel and magnificent gilded mirror and cornices, dating from the 1880s, which obscure a head of Liberty and red curtains, probably painted later.

The Senate Reception Room is one of the most heavily and ornately decorated of the rooms in the Capitol. The elaborate gilded plaster relief decorations include stags with projecting antlers and eagles in addition to leaves and fruit; these attract almost as much attention as the murals. The lower walls are covered with scagliola to simulate marble.

The room was damaged in an explosion in 1915, after which the murals were retouched by Charles Moberly. In 1930, George Matthews signed and dated his “restoration” of the frescoes, and the plaster work was regilded.

That year, curator Charles Fairman proposed subjects for the vacant spaces, but nothing was carried out until legislation was passed in 1955 to authorize five portraits of senators. These portraits, added in 1959, include Henry Clay by Allyn Cox, Daniel Webster by Adrian Lamb, Robert M. LaFollette by Chester La Follette, Robert A. Taft by Deane Keller, and John C. Calhoun by Arthur Conrad. The portraits fulfill Brumidi’s original plan for including “illustrious men” in these spaces.

Until conservation began on the north section of the room in late 1994, the murals appeared relatively dark because the walls and ceiling were coated with a brown-

ish-yellow varnish as well as layers of grime and nicotine. Conservators have removed extensive overpaint as well as layers of coating. Unexpected soft mauves and greens were uncovered in the borders and panels, which harmonize with the colors in the cleaned frescoes. The work was divided into phases over two years to accommodate the schedule of the Senate.

S-216

The President’s Room is among the most completely decorated and best-preserved rooms in the building (fig. 8–29). It also, at times, fulfills its original function as a place for the president during his visits to the Capitol. Presidents, probably beginning with James Buchanan, and certainly with Abraham Lincoln, signed legislation here at the end of sessions of Congress, just before their terms ended on March 4, a date changed by the Twentieth Amendment.²⁹ The room has been used much less frequently by presidents in the twentieth century, although most have signed special bills here, and the room is now used primarily by senators for press conferences and meetings.

It is not certain when the decision was made to have a room for the president in the new extension. A signed but undated Brumidi drawing for a ceiling similar to the one in this room, labeled “Ceiling of the Vice President’s Room,” was approved by Meigs (fig. 8–30), and it is possible that the function of the room was changed afterwards. The groin-vaulted ceiling on Walter’s floor plan



Fig. 8–29. The President’s Room. This richly decorated room, which Brumidi covered from floor to ceiling with murals celebrating the men and ideals fundamental to the country, is shown after its recent restoration. S–216.

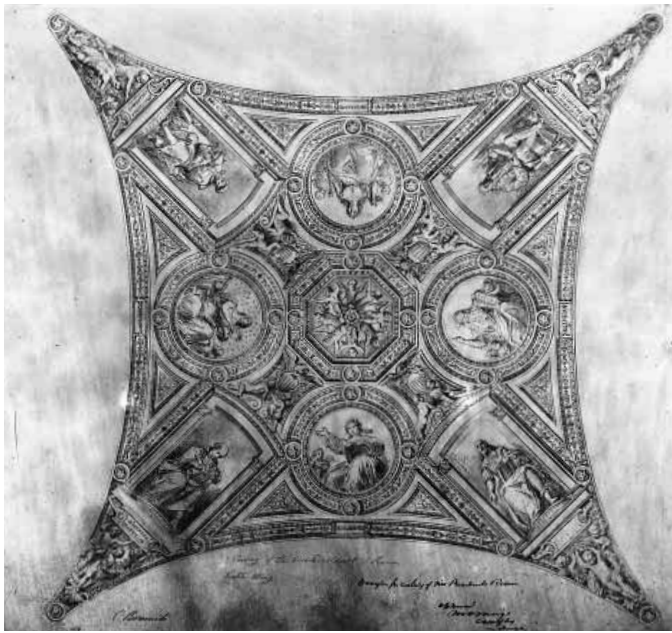


Fig. 8–30. Drawing adapted for the President’s Room ceiling. *Known only from this photograph, the drawing includes the same overall plan and the same corner figures that Brumidi painted in S–216. Here the female figures in the tondos are labeled Eloquence, Cosmology, Philosophy, and Religion, and stars appear instead of the state seals.*

was probably changed to accommodate Brumidi’s design, which was closely modeled on that of one of Raphael’s rooms in the Vatican (fig. 8–31).³⁰ Brumidi and his assistants decorated this room in 1859 and early 1860; “C. Brumidi 1860” appears on the spine of a book next to a cherub on the west wall.

For this unique room, Brumidi developed a scheme even more elaborate than the one he devised for the House Committee on Agriculture. The ceiling contains several levels of illusionistic space: projecting moldings, thirty-six trompe l’oeil copper relief medallions with the seals of the states and territories, gilded borders decorated with arabesques, and the actively engaged, lifelike cherubs. Every detail is carefully thought out; for example, the seals of the states and territories are arranged chronologically, with those of the first states of the Union at the center and those of the territories at the outer edges. The corner frescoes contain figures seated in niches, while the four frescoed tondos hold seated female figures shown against the sky as if looking down into the room, two with their toes pushing out past the frame toward the viewer. The walls below are completely covered with framed portraits, still lifes, and more cherubs and arabesques. The whole room conveys a sense of exuberance and energy and Brumidi’s pride in his new country.



Fig. 8–31. Raphael, Ceiling of the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican Palace. *Brumidi would have been familiar with this ceiling in Rome, and Meigs could have known it from color reproductions such as this one.*

From Lewis Gruner’s *Specimens of Ornamental Art*, 1850.

Brumidi expertly combined multiple painting media to achieve the effect he desired. The tondos, corner figures, and cherubs and eagles on the ceiling are in true fresco, surrounded by architectural moldings and medallions in tempera (fig. 8–32). The lunettes and portraits are in oil on plaster, while the lower walls are primarily *fresco in scialbatatura*. The delicately painted motifs on the gilded borders and panels also appear to be in that medium. However, the viewer is aware only of the harmony of the whole.

The four framed circular tondos on the ceiling hold Madonna-like allegorical figures representing the foundations of the government. Executive [Authority] holding a scepter, rules with the aid of “Wisdom” inscribed on her brooch, books entitled *US Law* and *Philosophy*, and the torch of Knowledge. Religion (fig. 8–33), on the north, seems to greet all who enter the room, while the other figures look down at their work or up to heaven for inspiration. Legislation, soberly dressed in warm brown Renaissance-style robes, holds an upraised sword and reads the Constitution. Liberty (fig. 8–34), looking upward, wears a red liberty cap and robe and is surrounded by thirteen stars in the sky. Pairs of cherubs in front of striped shields of the United States and eagles alternate with the tondos. The cherubs hold objects related to the



Fig. 8-32. Ceiling of the President's Room. *The complex design contains figures in various illusionistic architectural compartments, while the four circles seem to be open to the sky. S-216.*



Fig. 8-33. Religion. *Her face covered by a transparent veil, the figure symbolizing religion wears a cross and brocaded lace robe and holds a Bible. S-216.*



Fig. 8-34. Liberty. *The figure symbolizing liberty wears a sword and is pulling the axe out of the fasces. S-216.*



Fig. 8-35. Christopher Columbus. The explorer examines a globe and chart on a pedestal, at the base of which are an octant, mercury barometer, and magnetic compass. S-216.



Fig. 8-36. Cherub with eagle. Beneath the portrait of Franklin is one of the most beautifully painted figures in the room, a cherub pulling the arrow of war out of an eagle's beak. Note the seal for the territory of Utah. S-216.

adjacent scenes; for example, the figures next to Liberty hold the fasces and a scroll inscribed “E Pluribus Unum.” Because they overlap the frames, the cherubs appear to project toward us in three dimensions.

In the corners, as if seated in curved niches, with feet or knees projecting toward the viewer, are four historical figures representing fundamental aspects of the development of the nation: Amerigo Vespucci, with maps and spyglass, for Exploration; Christopher Columbus, with nautical instruments, for Discovery (fig. 8-35); Benjamin Franklin, reading a sheet inscribed *Buon Uomo Ricardo* (“Poor Richard” in Italian), referring to his almanac, and surrounded by books, newspapers, and a printing press, for History; and Pilgrim leader William Brewster holding a Bible for Religion. Early guidebooks note that Brumidi based his depictions on known portraits.³¹

Filling the pendentives under each portrait are varying numbers of squirming cherubs (fig. 8-36); the three in the northeast corner replace Brumidi's, which were damaged by leaks.³²

On the south wall is a lunette with a portrait of George Washington (fig. 8-37), modeled on the Rembrandt Peale porthole portrait then hanging in the Vice President's Room.³³ On the walls below, members of Washington's first cabinet are depicted in oval frames: Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of War Henry Knox, Attorney General Edmund Randolph, and Samuel Osgood, the first postmaster general.³⁴ The walls around and below them are embellished with trellis-like arabesques with cherubs and classical heads over gold backgrounds, illusionistic moldings, and still lifes of fruit.

Overall, the President's Room today presents much of its original appearance. The elaborate bronze chandelier, cast by Cornelius and Baker, is the only one made for the extensions remaining in the Capitol. It holds figures of Native Americans, pioneers, and different ethnic types.³⁵ The Minton floor tiles are in nearly original condition and the Tennessee marble mantel is the one designed by Walter. The Turkish sofa and chairs were purchased in 1875 and were re-covered in gold-embossed red leather by the Senate Commission on Art during its 1991-1992 refurbishment of drapery and furnishings.³⁶

However, some changes have been made to the room over the years. Brumidi himself made estimates for repairs as early as 1862; painting, probably of door frames, was carried out in 1868. Elaborate mirror frames, consoles, and valances were installed about 1883 to replace simpler frames designed for the room in 1860; they cover the illusionistic painted frames created by Brumidi. Brumidi's three cherubs with an American flag, which originally flew around the chandelier, were destroyed when the plaster around the fixture fell to the floor in



Fig. 8–37. Portrait of Washington on south wall. *The portrait of Washington is flanked by figures representing Peace and Victory (whose shield is inscribed with the names of Revolutionary War battle victories). S–216.*

Fig. 8–38. Newly conserved west wall. *Cleaned of overpaint and yellowed varnish, the jewel-like tones of the portraits of Randolph and Osgood and of the decorative elements enliven the room. Brumidi’s signature appears near the cherub at the upper right. S–216.*



1921.³⁷ The decorative borders and moldings on the walls and ceiling have been overpainted, with some modification of the original design. These borders and lower walls were painted in *fresco in scialbatura* in the color of stone, from which yellowed varnish has now been removed.³⁸ Annual reports note that the room was retouched in 1912 and 1916, and that restorations were performed in 1918 by Charles Moberly. In 1928, Brumidi’s decoration was threatened with destruction or removal when plans for the enlargement of the Senate Chamber were being discussed. In 1931, after the enlargement project was dropped, the corner cherubs were replaced and the room was given an extensive cleaning and restoration, with “colors freshened” and the gold leaf replaced and reburnished.³⁹ The ceiling murals were professionally conserved in 1994, when extensive overpaint was removed from Brumidi’s frescoes, restoring his vibrant colors and the illusion of figures able to move in space. The walls were given conservation treatment the next year (figs. 8–38 and 8–39).⁴⁰



Fig. 8–39. Conservator Christiana Cunningham-Adams at work. *The removal of discolored varnish has made a dramatic difference in the overall appearance of the President’s Room. S–216.*

Notes to Chapter 8

1 Dr. John B. Ellis, *The Sights and Secrets of the National Capital* (Chicago: Jones, Junkin & Co., 1869), p. 89.

2. TUW cost estimate to complete the extensions, November 26, 1859, TUW/PA (AAA reel 4146). TUW, "Notes for the Art Commission," February 2, 1860, AOC/LB.

3. MCMJ, February 21, 1857 (B-464).

4. Feb. 16, 1857, Pocket Diary, MCM Papers, LC. Photograph of pencil sketch for ceiling signed by Brumidi and Meigs, LC (Prints and Photographs Division). In addition to the sketch for Telegraph, ones for History, Physics, and three groups of Graces were owned by Mrs. Ashmun Brown, according to Myrtle Cheney Murdock, *Constantino Brumidi: Michelangelo of the United States Capitol* (Washington, D.C.: Monumental Press, 1950), p. 79.

5. On February 10, 1858, Bisco wrote to Meigs that he had completed "la presque totalité de la peinture de la voûte dans la Chambre dit Book Room [nearly all of the painting of the vault in the chamber called the Book Room]", AOC/CO. MCMJ, February 26, 1857 (B-473) and May 24, 1858 (C-193). Oertel to MCM, April 17, 1858, AOC/CO.

6. *Annual Report of Captain Meigs*, 36th Cong., 1st sess., October 27, 1859, Sen. Exec. Doc. 2, vol.2, p. 561. John B. Ellis, *The Sights and Secrets of the National Capital* (Chicago: Jones, Junkin & Co., 1869), p. 87.

7. CB to TUW, October 10, 1862; Chairman B. Gratz Brown to Secretary of the Interior James Harlan, July 17, 1866; EC to CB, July 19, 1866; CB to EC, July 20, 1866; EC to Harlan, July 21, 1866; Harlan to EC, August 8, 1866; EC to CB, August 9, 1866; CB to EC, August 12, 1866; EC to Harlan, August 13, 1866; Harlan authorized the work the same day. On August 14, 1866, Clark asked Brumidi to begin work; Brumidi replied to him the next day. NARA/RG 48, Series 290 and 291; AOC/CO.

8. Brumidi sent Walter an estimate for painting in the Post Office Room "Three groups of figures representing the months of the year in the corners" CB to TUW, October 10, 1862, TUW/PA (AAA roll 4149). The oil sketch for the three groups of female figures was reproduced in Murdock, *Brumidi*, p. 79.

9. The oil sketch was published in "Brumidi Paintings Found in Washington After a Search of Forty Years," *Washington Star*, November 2, 1919.

10. 1900, AOC/AR, p. 4. "Soap-and-Brush Brigade Cleans Up the Capitol," *Times-Herald*, August 26, 1947.

11. Copy of letter from F.O.C. Darley sent by J. Durand to MCM, October 30, 1856, AOC/CO.

12. E. Carstens to MCM, November 6, 1857, AOC/CO.

13. J. Leslie to MCM, December 7, 1858, AOC/CO.

14. C. Bisco to MCM, February 10, 1858, AOC/CO.

15. Henry Wilson to EC, March 8, 1871, AOC/CO.

16. Voucher, October 19, 1871, AOC/CO.

17. A medallion with the head of Liberty, flanked by flags, weapons, and fasces, was visible in the area now covered by the top of the mirror frame. DeB Randolph Keim, *Keim's Capitol Interior and Diagrams* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1875), p. 54.

18. *Congressional Record*, 46th Cong., 2d sess., February 24, 1880, p. 1075.

19. MCMJ, December 17, 1855 (A-772.)

20. The other proposed historical subjects were the election of Washington as commander of the American army, the first formal audience

given by the Congress to a representative of France, and the peace treaty between the United States and Britain. CB, undated proposal for the Senate Reception Room, written in French, c. 1855, AOC/CO.

21. MCMJ, January 15, 1856 (B-21.)

22. Meigs recorded the subjects as "Washington thanking Congress for the election as Commander-in-Chief, the signature of the Treaty of Paris, the representation of the French Ambassador, Gerard, in Congress" MCMJ, July 28, 1856 (B-240). Brumidi may have used the scene of the Treaty of Paris later in the first-floor Senate corridor.

23. Thomas was appointed superintendent of ornamental plasterers, Aug. 28, 1856, MCM Pocket Diary, MCM Papers, LC. The drawings may be by Thomas; the gilding was done by a Frenchman, Hugot, "peintre doreux," Hugot to MCM, March 20, 1859, AOC/CO, MCM to Ernest Thomas, Jan. 21, 1857, and TUW to John Floyd, Dec. 21, 1857, AOC/LB.

24. Only the four spandrels and the center of the dome were finished in early 1859. "The New Senate Hall," *New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p. 1.

25. B. Gratz Brown to James Harlan, secretary of the interior, July 17, 1866, NARA/RG 48, series 291, box 2. CB to EC, July 20, 1866, and EC to James Harlan, July 21, 1866, NARA/RG 48, series 290, box 2. *Report of the Architect of the Capitol Extension*, Nov. 1, 1869, p. 3, and Voucher, November 22, 1869, AOC/CO.

26. CB to EC, June 9, 1870, AOC/CO. 1870, AOC/AR, p. 1. Voucher issued to CB "for South Wall of Senate Reception Room," Nov. 22, 1870, AOC Voucher Book, Works of Art, v. 1. CB to EC, May 1, 1871, and CB to EC, April 22, 1871, AOC/CO. 1871, AOC/AR, p. 3. Voucher issued to CB for "three panels consisting of figures and medallions," Nov. 23, 1871, AOC/Voucher Book.

27. EC to CB, August 15, 1872, AOC/LB. The sketch is known from a photograph. William C. Allen has suggested that the change in theme from the presidents to the cabinet may have been related to the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson and the Senate's role in affirming the president's right to control the cabinet.

28. Julie Aronson discovered that the subjects of these frescoes were previously misidentified in *Art in the United States Capitol* based on CB's undated proposal in French describing the figures as "la Jurisprudence . . . la Force . . . la Sapience . . . la Prudence." He apparently intended to represent the four virtues and later corrected his mistake. The figures were correctly identified in early guidebooks, such as *Keim's Capitol Interior and Diagrams*, 1875, p. 26.

29. President Lincoln was described using the room on the day of his inauguration in the *Evening Star* (Washington), March 4, 1861.

30. The present Vice President's Room, S-214, is similar in shape to S-216. Documents dating from 1858 describe a plan of ceiling decoration for the Vice President's Room with plasterwork by Ernest Thomas and painted "boys" by Brumidi, which, if executed in S-214, is no longer extant. The decoration was expected to be finished by December 1859 (*Annual Report of Captain M. C. Meigs*, Oct 27, 1859).

31. DeB. Randolph Keim, *Keim's Illustrated Hand-Book Washington and Environs* (Washington: n.p., 1874), p. 31 reports that Columbus was painted from a portrait in Mexico. Ben Franklin's pose and features are related to an engraved portrait in *National Portrait Gallery of Eminent Americans* (New York: Johnson, Fry & Company), vol. 1. The profile of Vespucci was copied from a 16th-century portrait, now in the National Portrait Gallery, owned by the son of Robert Fulton [thanks to Christiana Cunningham-Adams for this discovery].

32. Eben F. Comins (b. 1875) inserted the new figures in true fresco. He wrote Architect David Lynn about the project on May 16, 1931, AOC/CO, and was paid on July 16, 1931, AOC/Voucher Books. The

records of the AOC also contain a photograph of him at work as well as one of the original cherubs, AOC/CO. Also see 1931, AOC/AR, p. 20.

33. Meigs asked for the portrait to be brought to the President’s Room for Brumidi on October 28, 1859, as indicated on a note on a drawing for mirrors for the room. AOC/CO.

34. Actually, the Postmaster General did not officially become part of the Cabinet until 1829. On April 3, 1860, Brumidi is documented to have been copying a portrait of Randolph, in a letter from W.B. Franklin to Joseph Blank, the Attorney General, AOC/LB. The Knox portrait may be based on the one then in Faneuil Hall and later transferred to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

35. The chandelier was made by the Philadelphia firm in 1864 for \$900. The eighteen gas lights were electrified in 1896, and in 1915 six arms and the twenty-four shades etched with designs were added. The crystal prisms that were added at that time have recently been removed.

36. The voucher for the leather-covered chairs is dated June 30, 1875, Secretary of the Senate, *Receipts and Expenditures of the Senate*, 44th

Cong., 1st sess., Sen. Mis. Doc. 1, p. 54. Tradition holds that the large mahogany table in the center of the room was used by President Lincoln; however, inventories of the furniture in the room in the 1870s do not include it. The mahogany grandfather’s clock was purchased in 1887.

37. *Keim’s Capitol Interior*, 1875, p. 32. *The Book of Washington*, Washington Board of Trade, 1926–27, p. 93. Non-original cherubs painted in oil on canvas glued to the ceiling some time in the 1920s were removed during the 1994 conservation of the ceiling.

38. William D. Haley, in *Philip’s Washington Described* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1861), describes the walls as being “in secco,” p. 138. A recent scientific analysis by Christiana Cunningham-Adams shows that the lower decoration was first painted in *fresco in scialbatura*.

39. 1931, AOC/AR, pp. 20–21.

40. A detailed condition report of the room was made by Bernard Rabin in 1991. Christy Cunningham-Adams conserved the ceiling in 1994 and the walls in 1995.