

CHAPTER 13

A Conservator's Perspective

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In 1986, with over 50 years' experience conserving paintings in Italy and the United States, I began one of the most exciting and important projects of my life: the treatment of the frescoes by Constantino Brumidi in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol. The conservation of the 4,664-square-foot canopy with *The Apotheosis of Washington* and the 300-foot-long frescoed frieze below it dwarfed in size and scope other projects I have directed. The work in the Rotunda was undoubtedly the culmination of my career.

Even before I put my hand to the frescoes, I felt compelled to know more about the artist. Constantino Brumidi's talent is evident throughout the Capitol. That he was gifted is not unusual; I have conserved many works by technically gifted artists. However, Brumidi's work is unusual because he depicted the people and events of American history with insight and compassion. In the frieze, for example, he depicted Native Americans and Mexicans with individuality and dignity, in contrast to his successor Filippo Costaggini, who showed Mexicans as ethnographic types and Native Americans as savages.

Fig. 13-1. Movable scaffold used to restore the frieze. The conservators climbed the many flights of zigzagging steps to reach the platform high above the thousands of daily visitors.

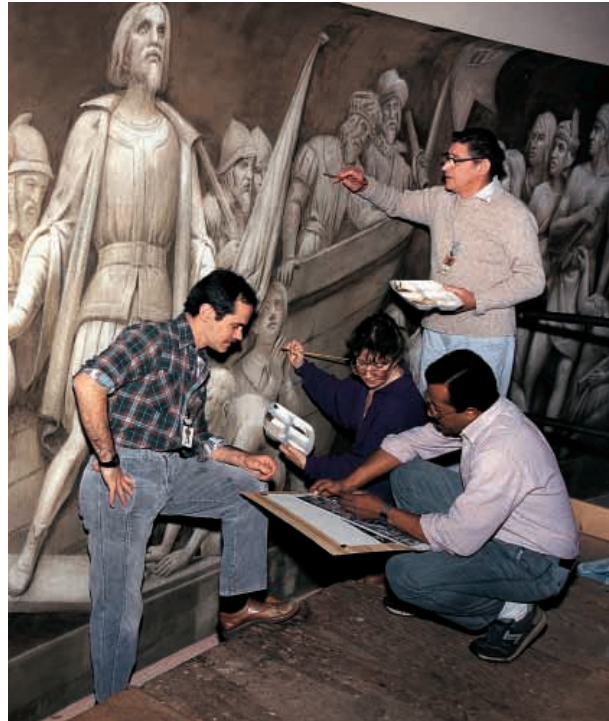


Fig. 13-2. Conservators at work. From left to right, Larry Keck, Constance S. Silver, Ron Cunningham, and Bernard Rabin are shown on the scaffold platform next to the over-life-size painted figures.

The primary focus of our conservation efforts was to ensure the survival and appropriate presentation of these national artistic treasures. In executing the treatments, however, we found that we were also tracing the artist's evolution and expanding the knowledge of nineteenth-century mural technique. In a very real sense my team and I felt ourselves to be rediscovering our nation's history through the art of Constantino Brumidi.

The program to conserve and restore the murals of the Capitol was initiated by Architect of the Capitol George M. White and Curator Anne-Imelda Radice with the survey I conducted in January 1981. Based on the priorities I identified, special funds for the conservation of wall painting have been appropriated by Congress each year at the Architect's request. In addition to the conservation projects described here, I have worked on a number of other rooms and frescoes in the Capitol. In recent years, younger colleagues with expertise in fresco have carried on the work.

The major frescoes high above the floor of the Rotunda have been subject to less damage than those in accessible and heavily used areas, but nevertheless have suffered various kinds of deterioration over time. The murals in the Capitol have been altered and damaged in a number of ways. The most basic reason is that mural paintings are literally part of the architecture, and thus are sub-

jected to all the agents that actively degrade working buildings. Like the Capitol itself, Brumidi's art has suffered from leaks from broken pipes and clogged gutters, fires, fluctuating humidity, atmospheric pollutants and grime, a terrorist bomb, construction-related cracking, careless workers, and wear and tear from millions of visitors. In addition, overzealous early attempts at restoration resulted in removal of unstable original paint and massive repainting in the fashion of the particular restorer's time. These destructive agents often exacerbated certain weaknesses in Brumidi's technique of execution, such as the use of pigments that proved to be incompatible with, and thus poorly adhered to, the plaster.

There have been some improvements since Brumidi's time in maintaining more stable interior environmental conditions, especially the air conditioning installed in 1938. Since the 1950s, the conservation field has become more science-based, and new techniques for examining and treating works have been developed. Finally, and perhaps most important, the development of conservation as a professional discipline has mandated an ethical approach to treatments, ensuring that fidelity to the artist's work is paramount. The continuing advances in the field of conservation will make it possible to return the 200-year-old U.S. Capitol, perhaps the world's busiest historic building, to its original and unique beauty.

It is important to note that the professional conservation of historic and artistic works is a relatively new discipline. The first *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* for conservators was developed only a few decades ago, in 1963, by the American Institute of Conservation (AIC). The code defined conservation as including the examination, treatment, and systematic maintenance of works of art, based on scientific analysis and historical research. All steps taken are carefully documented in written and photographic form. The code, revised in 1994, now begins by stating: "The conservation professional shall strive to attain the highest possible standard in all aspects of conservation, including, but not limited to, preventive conservation, examination, documentation, treatment, research, and education."

The goals of the conservator are to preserve the object physically, to return it to its most appropriate historic and aesthetic appearance, and to provide a plan for long-term stability and preservation. To answer the questions that arise during treatment, the conservator must call upon the expertise of scientists, archivists, and art historians. Like a physician, the conservator endeavors to "do no harm." Treatment must be sensitive to and respectful of the artist's original intent. I believe it is much better to leave a slight layer of grime than to take the risk of altering or removing original material. Reversible materials are used in any reconstructions, so that the original materials

are never permanently altered. Visual reintegration, sometimes called "retouching," is now referred to as "in-painting" because it is limited, as much as possible, to restoration of small areas of lost paint when performed by professional conservators. Fortunately, because of advances in the control of interior environments, the frescoes of the Rotunda will remain stable for generations.

The conservator's responsibility is to examine and study each inch and brushstroke of the painting in order to preserve the integrity and aesthetic impact of the artist's work. Conservation thus requires an unusual rapport between the long-dead artist and the conservator.

My first challenge in conserving the frescoes was to conduct preliminary examinations of the murals, which in themselves required challenging logistical measures. To inspect the frieze I had to lower myself from the balcony in a bosun's chair hanging fifty-eight feet above the floor. For the treatment itself, a movable scaffold was erected (fig. 13-1). It provided us access to the entire frieze. My full-time assistants in the conservation of the frieze were Larry Keck and Constance S. Silver, with Ron Cunningham and Susan Mason working for shorter times (fig. 13-2).

In planning for the treatment of the canopy, it was not possible to reach the curved surface to inspect it closely or to conduct tests ahead of time; I was able to make some rudimentary spot cleaning tests only at the lowest edge of the fresco by using a pole from a ladder on the balcony. Therefore, I approached the canopy with trepidation, not knowing the problems that we would find. Because a space frame across the balcony would not have provided complete access to the fresco and was more costly, a carefully designed scaffold was built from the floor of the Rotunda, its weight transferred to the massive columns in the crypt below (fig. 13-3). A passage was left through the scaffold for access across the Rotunda. I requested a small elevator for transportation of equipment, supplies, and personnel, particularly for myself in light of the fact that I was past retirement age. (At one point, the plans for the elevator were nearly scuttled when the Architect of the Capitol discovered that the previous restorer, Allyn Cox, had walked up.) The ride took at least eight minutes; my youthful crew often found they could beat it by walking up the stairs, between the inner and outer domes.

On the platform at the top of the fixed scaffold, smaller rolling scaffolds were provided to enable my team, which consisted of Larry Keck, Constance S. Silver, Perry Hurt, and Todd Overturf, to reach all levels of the concave canopy (fig. 13-4). Because there is no plumbing at the top of the dome, special pumps and drains were designed so that the murals could be cleaned with water.

With any large-scale project, delays are always possible. A unique consideration of working in the Rotunda of the

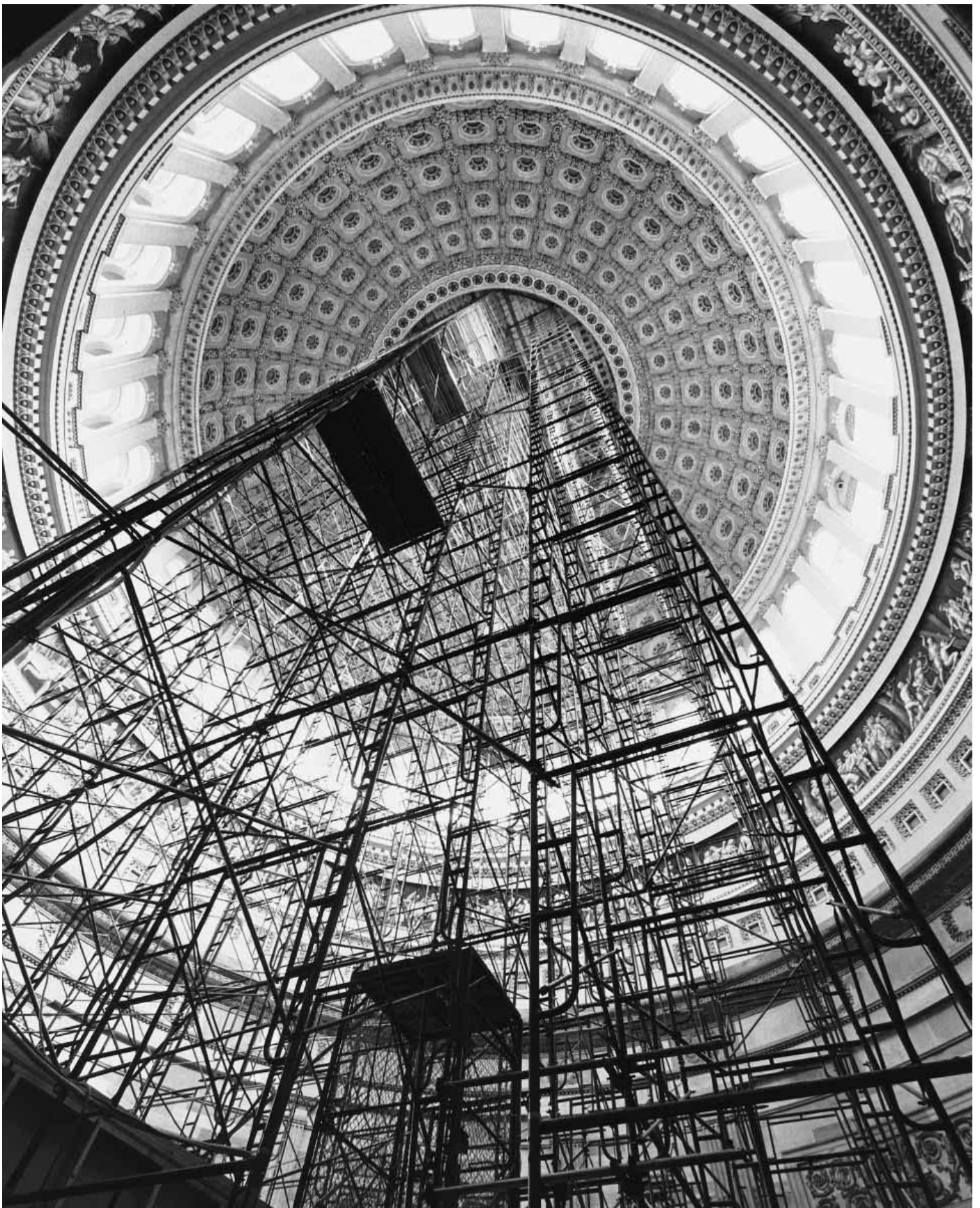


Fig. 13-3. Scaffold constructed for the restoration of the canopy. *The 150-foot-high structure supporting a wooden floor at the base of the fresco filled much of the Rotunda for a year.*



nation's Capitol was its ceremonial function. If an important person, such as one of the four living presidents, had died, the scaffold might have had to be dismantled to permit the remains to lie in state. Fortunately, our fears of such an eventuality were groundless.

Interestingly, our project coincided with the conservation of the frescoes by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. Keenly aware of the controversy and misunderstandings surrounding that treatment, we kept Congress and the press informed through periodic press conferences and by inviting them to view the restored canopy up close before the scaffold was removed. We brought in as consultants internationally respected conservators, including Sheldon Keck, who with his wife, Caroline, was founder of two major conservation programs in the United States, and Paolo and Laura Mora, chief conservators at the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome and coauthors of *Conservation of Wall Paintings*. The Moras inspected the canopy before, during, and after conservation; they provided us with valuable peer review, confirming that the treatment we selected was fully appropriate. They also provided important insight into the cleaning of the most heavily overpainted areas in room H-144, the

former Agriculture Committee Room. They were with us on site for several weeks during an extended stay in Washington. I was gratified by the Italian experts' enthusiasm for Brumidi's talent and skill and by their comments on how hard-working and dedicated they found my team. Dr. Robert Feller, of the Mellon Institute, Carnegie-Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, also reviewed the conservation materials we used.

The conservation analysis and treatment were supported by research into the extensive records of the Architect of the Capitol. Statements by Brumidi and early photographs were critical to our efforts to restore the original intent of the artist as closely as possible. Architect of the Capitol George White remained personally involved in the project. He viewed the work at the top of the dome in progress and approved decisions about goals and treatment. Dr. Barbara Wolanin, Curator for the Architect of the Capitol, and Tom Ward, Supervising Engineer of the Capitol, supplied unlimited support in coordinating all aspects of the undertaking. Functioning as a team, we brought our best professional judgments to bear while returning visual integrity to the frescoes.

Fig. 13-4. Rolling scaffolds atop the fixed scaffold. *The conservators could reach all parts of the curved canopy from the platforms at varying heights.*