



C. BRUMIDI

CHAPTER 12

Death of “the Genius of the Capitol”

Brumidi worked on the cartoons for the frieze until he lost consciousness the day before he died. Although asthma had been his main complaint, his death certificate lists the cause of death as “chronic Bright’s Disease and uremia,” that is, kidney failure.¹ His death occurred at 6:30 a.m. on February 19, 1880, at his home at 921 G Street, N.W., a three-story brick house owned by his former wife, now Lola V. Walsh. His longtime friend Father Benedict Sestini, S.J., had been called to his deathbed by his son Laurence but did not reach him in time.

At the funeral, held the next day at his house and attended by many friends, the Catholic burial service was read by Rev. J. A. Walter, pastor of St. Matthew’s Church. His pallbearers were Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark, Professor Marini (L. G. Marini, in whose dancing academy, Marini Hall, Brumidi had prepared cartoons for the frieze), Ben Perley Poore (the popular reporter, *Boston Journal* columnist, clerk of the Senate Printing Committee, and, ironically, a critic of Meigs’s art program in the 1850s), William McPyncheon (Edward

Clark’s clerk), Amzi Smith (Brumidi’s friend, who worked in the Senate Document Room), and George F. W. Strieby (one of the painters who assisted him at the Capitol).²

Later that year, Congress paid the \$500 still owed to Brumidi for the canopy to his heirs Laurence and Elena and gave \$200 to Lola for funeral expenses.

The authorizing bill was introduced by Senator Daniel Voorhees, who eulogized:

He who beautifies the pathway of life, who creates images of loveliness for the human eye to rest upon, is a benefactor of the human race. He will be crowned by the gratitude of his own and of succeeding generations. In the older countries of Europe, where the profession of art has a higher rank than here, Brumidi would have had a public funeral, and his remains would have been deposited in ground set apart for persons of distinction. In England he would have had a place and a tablet in Westminster Abbey.

It matters, little, however, whether we or those who come after us do anything to perpetuate his memory. The walls of his Capitol will hold his fame fresh and ever increasing as long as they themselves shall stand.³

He was followed by Senator Justin S. Morrill, who commented:

Covering as he has done so much space with his fresco paintings—so difficult and so durable—it is



Fig. 12–2. Commemorative plaque in Glenwood Cemetery. *Brumidi’s grave in the Germon family plot was marked in 1951 through the efforts of Myrtle Cheney Murdock.*

Photo: Theodor Horydczac.

12–1. Bust of Brumidi against a newly conserved panel in the Brumidi Corridors. *In recent years, the artist of the Capitol has been honored by this marble portrait and by the program to conserve his murals.* United States Senate Collection.

wonder that so great a part should be fairly excellent and so little that competent critics esteem otherwise . . . his great desire was that he might live to complete his last great work. So long had he devoted his heart and strength to this Capitol that his love and reverence for it was not surpassed by even that of Michael Angelo for St. Peter's.⁴

Senator Morrill's comparison may have suggested the epithet "Michelangelo of the Capitol," which was first mentioned by Hazelton in 1897 and later adopted by Myrtle Cheney Murdock for the title of her book. Many decades later, the Congress again recognized Brumidi's contributions by commissioning a bust of him for the Capitol (fig. 12-1).

Brumidi's American wife, Lola, buried the artist in the Germon family plot at Glenwood Cemetery alongside her parents (fig. 12-2). Brumidi had separated from Lola some time in the 1870s; by 1879, she had remarried. However, she remained concerned for Brumidi's welfare, and at the end of his life, Brumidi was living in a house she owned.⁵ Legal records reveal her ownership of a number of pieces of property and her apparent business acumen. Brumidi, however, died penniless.⁶ Lola later married Captain Edwin Kirkwood and moved to Richmond, Virginia; they both died in 1918. She was buried alongside Constantino Brumidi in Glenwood Cemetery.

Brumidi's will, which was filed on June 27, 1879 (but never probated), left all of his estate, including his designs, sketches, paintings, and library, to his son Laurence. Laurence Stauros Brumidi (1861-1920) (fig. 12-3) received his first training in painting from his father. By age seventeen, he had produced a copy of a painting by Guido Reni; Brumidi sent this copy to Senator Justin Morrill, who wrote, "It is quite a pleasing picture, and considering the short time he has attempted any work of this kind I think it betokens a talent of which his father may reasonably be hopeful."⁷ It is puzzling that, at the time of Brumidi's death, Laurence was often called his "adopted son." Laurence studied art in Rome for five years around 1880, winning a prize medal at the Royal Institute of Fine Arts. He was bitterly disappointed in not being chosen to complete his father's Capitol frieze, but the Joint Committee on the Library finally paid him \$1500 for the use of his father's sketches.⁸ Laurence became director of the Kansas City Art Association and School of Design in 1888. He studied in Paris from 1893 to 1894, exhibiting work in the Salon and winning a prize. He painted portraits, landscapes, and church commissions. In 1916, however, he was judged insane and committed to St. Elizabeth's mental hospital in Washington, D.C., where he died in 1920. Laurence's obituary stated: "He was of a retiring disposition, and was a keen



Fig. 12-3. Laurence S. Brumidi as a young man. *Brumidi's son hoped to complete the frieze begun by his father.* Lola Germon Brumidi Family Album, United States Senate Collection.

student of all things pertaining to art."⁹ A year before his death, in 1919, two crates he had placed in storage were discovered at the National Savings & Trust Co. They held twenty-seven oil paintings, including the final oil sketch for *The Apotheosis of Washington*, which were sold at auction in 1925.¹⁰

The Completion of the Rotunda Frieze

The first of several letters recommending Filippo Costaggini (fig. 12–4) as Brumidi’s successor is dated February 20, the day after Brumidi’s death.¹¹ Costaggini, born in 1837, came to the United States in 1870 and had extensive experience decorating churches. Edward Clark still had no funds appropriated for the work, but he agreed to accept résumés from artists with fresco experience. Costaggini said that he was recommended by Brumidi himself because they were both trained at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome. The day of Brumidi’s death, a newspaper reported that Brumidi had requested Edward Clark to entrust the completion of the frieze to Costaggini.¹²

A number of other painters wrote letters expressing interest in finishing the frieze. One even proposed to redo the Rotunda completely in Victorian Gothic style.¹³ However, by May, Costaggini was selected to be Brumidi’s successor:

The Joint Committee on the Library before Congress adjourned, instructed the Architect of the Capitol, Mr. Clark to give the New York fresco artist, Filippo Costaggini, a trial at completing the allegorical fresco belt in the Capitol dome left unfinished by Brumidi. No appropriation has been made for continuing the work at the point where the late artist stopped. He believes he can carry out Brumidi’s idea and style in the completion of the great undertaking. If he fails, his work will be erased and another artist will be given a chance to attempt it.¹⁴

By September 1880 he was at work on finishing “William Penn and the Indians,” for the same wages of \$10 a day that Brumidi had earned.¹⁵ Beneath the right-hand group of Indians, he wrote in pencil “F. Costaggini commincio in questo punto,” to mark the point at which he started (fig. 12–5). The difference between the leg and foot painted by Brumidi and those by Costaggini is dramatic (fig. 12–6). Brumidi’s strokes are almost impressionistic, just enough to create the appearance of three-dimensional forms from the floor, while Costaggini’s style was tighter, more linear and detailed, with the shoe buckle carefully outlined. Brumidi’s Indians were dressed almost in classical style, while Costaggini drew every bit of fringe on each costume. Consequently, his figures look somewhat flatter and stiffer than Brumidi’s. He traced Brumidi’s scroll of sketches onto his own twenty-four-foot scroll, and he purchased a cast of an ancient classical frieze to help create the three-dimensional effect needed.¹⁶

Costaggini’s work was interrupted by other projects to which he was committed, partly because his pay at the Capitol was so low. After completing the scene of William

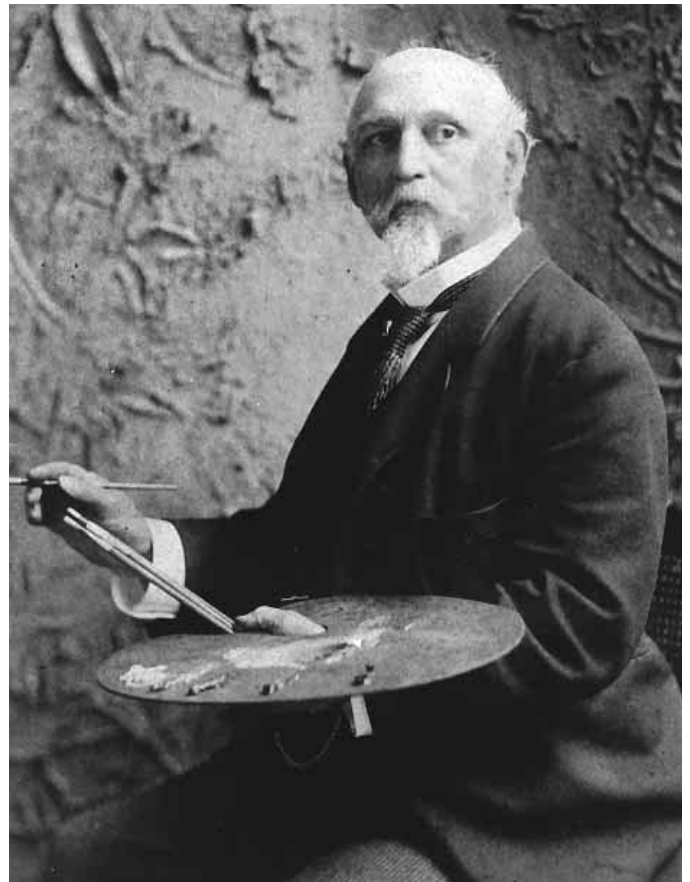


Fig. 12–4. Filippo Costaggini. *The Italian immigrant artist was recommended by Brumidi to complete the frieze because of his similar academic training in Rome.*

Penn, he worked on the frieze into 1881, progressing to the scenes entitled “Colonization of New England,” “Oglethorpe and the Indians,” “Battle of Lexington,” and “Declaration of Independence” (see foldout). Although Costaggini worked in Philadelphia in 1882, he was at the Capitol essentially full time, as many as 250 days a year, for the first several years.

Costaggini took some liberties with Brumidi’s design; the most radical change is seen in “Death of Tecumseh,” for which Costaggini made a new sketch in 1884, eliminating Brumidi’s small scene, “Decatur at Tripoli.”¹⁷ He signed this scene at the base of the tree to the right, and above his signature appears a hooded face, possibly a self-portrait, as if carved into the trunk of the tree (fig. 12–7). That year, Costaggini must have realized that Brumidi’s sketches would not extend far enough to encircle the Rotunda. He “found that the subjects were not sufficient to fill the space owing to a miscalculation,” and he began to enlarge the scale of the scenes in order to make them longer.¹⁸ Consequently, his figures are taller than Brumidi’s and his groups look more crowded. He also proposed adding a new scene entitled “Driving the Last Spike in the Pacific Railroad,” but this was not approved.¹⁹

In 1885, Costaggini signed and dated “American Army entering the City of Mexico.” In 1886 and 1887, he was painting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and in Philadelphia and worked only a few days at the Capitol. Finally, in May 1889, he signed and dated “Discovery of Gold in California.” Tellingly, his signatures grew larger in size (fig. 12–8). Over the almost nine-year span of his work on the



Fig. 12–5. Costaggini’s inscription. *Brumidi’s successor wrote in Italian “F. Costaggini began at this point” where he took up work on the frieze. Rotunda.*

frieze, Costaggini was paid \$16,162 for working approximately 1,600 days.²⁰

As Costaggini predicted, the last figure in the scene did not meet up with Brumidi’s first scene as planned, and a gap of over 31 feet remained. Costaggini was accused by some of deliberately crowding Brumidi’s scenes in order to make room for his own designs. One of his chief critics was Brumidi’s son Laurence, who had hoped to complete the frieze himself.

Measurements taken during the conservation of the frieze and compared to those on Brumidi’s sketch show the source of the problem: although originally told that the height of the frieze was 9 feet, he actually had only 7 feet 9 inches of usable vertical space. Even including the blank band at the bottom, which is hidden by the ledge beneath it, the frieze is only 8 feet 3 inches high. Thus each of Brumidi’s own scenes, retaining its original proportions, is smaller than he had originally intended in 1859.

The history of attempts to complete the frieze is long and agonizing. A resolution to allow Costaggini to complete it for \$6,000 was passed in 1896. Costaggini proposed scenes showing the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad at Promontory Point and President Cleveland opening the Columbian Exposition; the next year, he created designs for scenes showing the Civil War (Sherman’s army passing the review stand) and the Emancipation Proclamation (fig. 12–9), but arguments over the subjects prevented authorization of the work.²¹ When Costaggini died in 1904 with the frieze still unfin-



Fig. 12–6. “William Penn and the Indians.” *Brumidi painted the left half of the scene, Costaggini the right. Note the different level of detail in Penn’s shoes and in the costumes of the Native Americans. Rotunda.*



Fig. 12-7. The hidden portrait. *Costaggini* may have painted a self-portrait over his signature in the tree trunk at the end of "Death of Tecumseh." Rotunda.

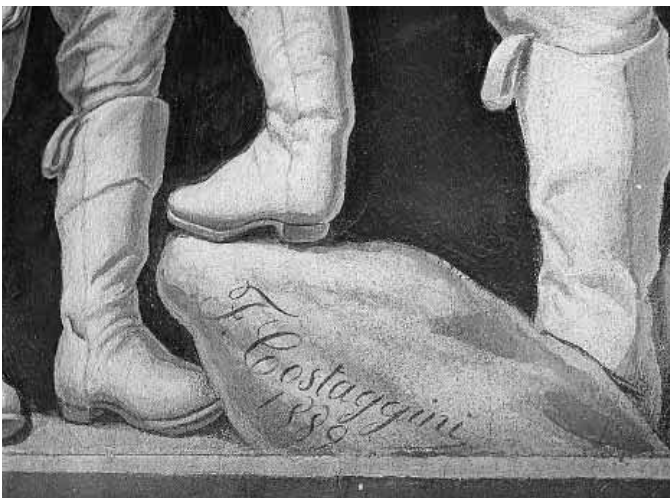


Fig. 12-8. Signature and date on "Discovery of Gold in California." *Filippo Costaggini* signed his name prominently in the last scene he completed. Rotunda.

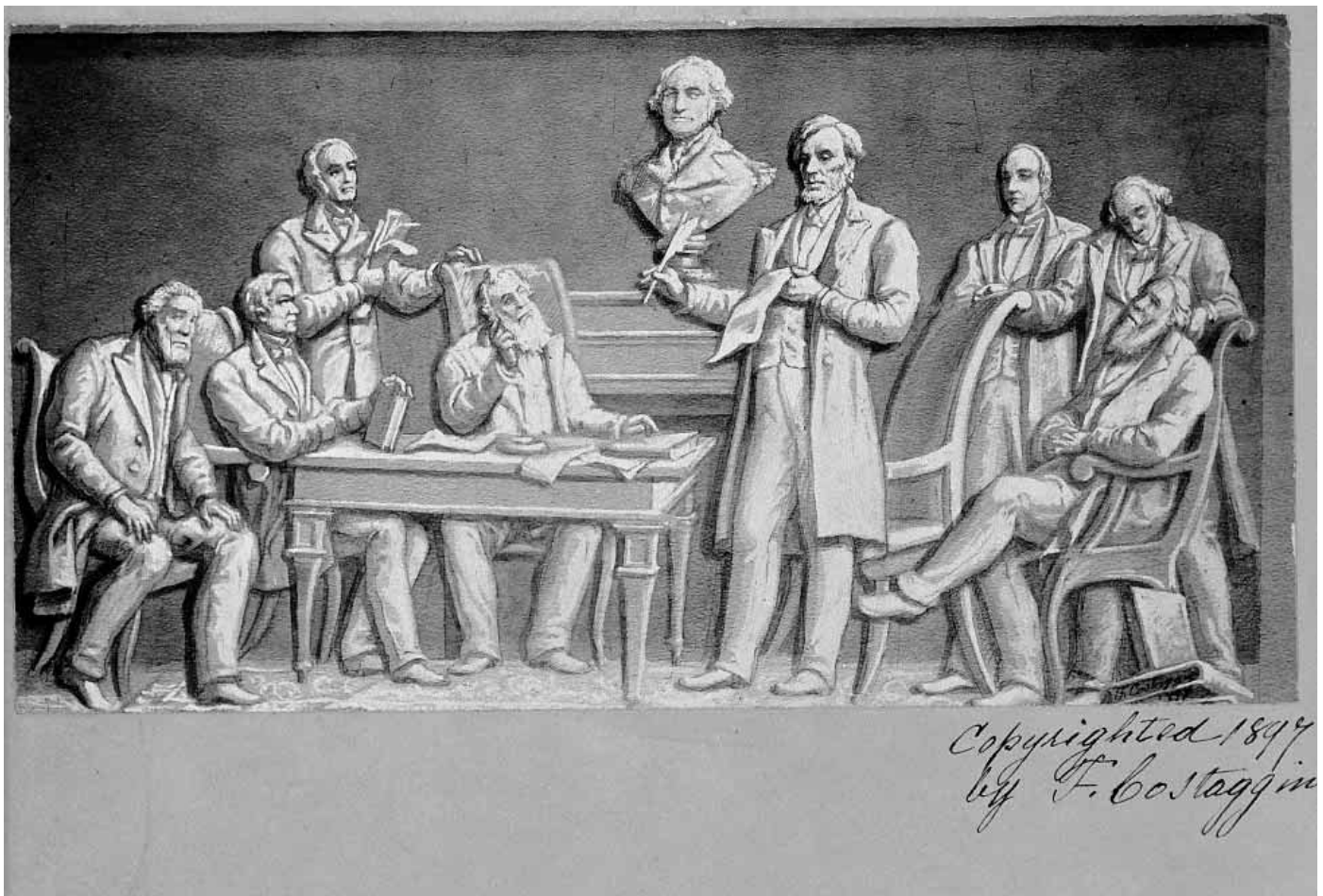


Fig. 12-9. Filippo Costaggini. Sketch for the Emancipation Proclamation, 1897. *None of the artist's proposed scenes were approved. Architect of the Capitol.*

ished, it had already been badly streaked by leaks during a storm in 1898 (see fig. 14-2). In 1908, another blocked drain caused further damage. Brumidi's scaffold still dangled in the Rotunda "like a huge ungainly spider."²²

A new bill to complete the frieze was introduced in 1914. The subjects "Grant and Lee at Appomattox," "Panama Canal," and "Triumph of Aerial Navigation" were discussed. The American Institute of Architects, on the other hand, described the trompe l'oeil sculpture as "a miserable sham" and urged Congress to "condemn the whole thing."²³ The idea was finally bogged down in arguments over whether the apple tree in the Appomattox scene was historically accurate. In 1918, Charles Ayer Whipple was allowed to paint in the gap a sample scene called "Spirit of 1917" (fig. 12-10). Whipple had hoped to paint three scenes, but the poor quality of his work was evidently recognized, for he was not allowed to continue, although a joint resolution was passed in 1919 to restore and complete the frieze. In 1928, Charles Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic Ocean was dis-

cussed as a subject for a scene. The idea of either completely replacing or completing the frieze was brought up periodically in the Congress. In 1945, Architect of the Capitol David Lynn explored the possibility of redoing the frieze in marble high relief, harkening back to Meigs's idea of almost a century before. Finally, legislation authorizing the painting of the last three scenes was passed in 1950, and funds were appropriated in 1951. In 1952, a century after Brumidi arrived in America, Allyn Cox signed a contract, and he completed his work in 1953 (fig. 12-11). In addition to cleaning the surface of the nineteenth-century frieze, he repainted the uneven dark background of all of the scenes. The entire frieze was finally dedicated on May 11, 1954.

In 1986, Congress appropriated funds to remove accumulated grime, overpaint, and streaks caused by leaking water. The conservation treatment, completed early in 1987, vividly restored the illusion of relief sculpture (see chapter 14). Damage from leaks caused by a stopped-up drain was repaired in 1994.



Fig. 12–10. Frieze with Charles Whipple’s “Spirit of 1917.”
The 1918 trial piece was not a success, for Whipple was not allowed to complete the frieze.

Photo: Underwood and Underwood.

Brumidi’s Reputation

Brumidi’s stature at the time of his death is shown by the number of obituaries describing his career published in the *Washington Post*, *Washington Star*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Philadelphia Telegraph* (both Daily and Evening), *New York Times*, *New York Tribune*, and *American Architect and Building News*. He was praised as “the genius of the Capitol” and as one “whose decoration at the Capitol has given him a world-wide reputation.”²⁴

However, at the same time, many considered Brumidi’s style of painting and concepts old-fashioned. Some writers praised his technique and dedication but disparaged his artistic sense: “Signore Brumidi, whatever may be said of his design, understood his process thoroughly, and was enthusiastic and indefatigable in his work.”²⁵ “While



Fig. 12–11. Allyn Cox at work on the frieze. *Cox is shown here retouching damage to Brumidi’s fresco.*

Signor Brumidi's remarkable designs have caused much grief to the judicious, and infinite mirth to the irreverent, he was certainly a master of the difficult process of fresco-painting, which is the most durable known of art."²⁶

The most negative criticism was published by the *Philadelphia Daily Telegraph*:

. . . it may be said, "He was most industrious. . . . But, if the quality of his work is considered, we doubt whether those who are at all competent to judge with regard to the matter will differ among themselves as to the fact that his employment for a long term of years, in the face of repeated and emphatic protests from people who knew what good decoration was, was most scandalous.

Brumidi covered several acres of the Capitol walls with his frescoes The bulk of Brumidi's work, however, is to the last degree abominable. . . . In spite of the howling—howling is the only proper word in such a connection—atrocities which he perpetuated on the Naval and other committee-rooms, on the corridors, on the Congressional halls, and on every nook and corner upon which he could lay his hands, he was permitted to paint on the interior of the dome a composition which, both in design and execution, is about as abominable as anything of that kind well could be, and at the time of his death he was engaged in "decorating" the frieze of the rotunda with an imitation bas-relief which, if anything, was worse than the artistic atrocity on the ceiling."²⁷

The press took up this negative tone in discussing the question of who would finish the frieze. The *American Architect and Building News* wanted William M. Hunt or John La Farge to be considered, but was not sure Brumidi's frieze should be continued at all "if it fails as a work of art, which we believe it does," and questioned congressmen's ability to decide aesthetic questions.²⁸ In 1884, the publication continued its derogatory comments while Costaggini was completing the frieze: "The finishing touch is at last to be put to the painful caricature which makes the lower part of the dome in the Capitol at Washington ridiculous, by the addition of a new jumble of what are supposed to be historical subjects. . . as there was no one in Washington with energy enough to prevent him, [Brumidi] actually spent many years of his life in carrying out this dreary joke."²⁹

Negative assessment continued into the early twentieth century. In 1911, critic Elisabeth Luther Carey wrote that Brumidi was "by no means unversed in the science of his craft, but no one will pretend that his decorations amount to anything as art." Although in 1919 a favorable comment appeared—"There is no question but what Brumidi will go down in history as the artistic genius of

the Capitol"—the next year, he was described as "a famous interior decorator." Brumidi's reputation also suffered from being over-dramatized: "More romance, travel and patriotic efforts entered into his career than is usually accorded to a hundred men."³⁰

By the early part of the twentieth century, little accurate information about Brumidi was known, and his work was being overpainted without remorse. It is ironic that Charles Fairman could say in 1930, "In these paintings he has touched a high mark in the excellency of mural decoration of his period, or for that matter, any period," just after many of Brumidi's frescoes had been painted over by inferior artists such as Charles A. Whipple, George B. Matthews, and Charles Moberly.³¹

Although Allyn Cox cleaned the frieze while adding the last three scenes in 1953, at the time he was hired to clean and restore the canopy in 1959 he felt free to repaint Brumidi's fresco almost completely. Cox once stated his justification for this action: "In the case of the Capitol frescoes I recommended repainting. But, as I was careful to state clearly, and was understood before I began, we were dealing with paintings whose chief qualities were *architectural* and *historical*, and the job there was to preserve them as decorative and historic parts of the Capitol building, even if it did involve more repainting than is considered ethical in the best museum practice."³²

Thus, by the 1960s, accurate evaluation of Brumidi's achievement was not possible because so much of his work had been painted over, retouched, or darkened by grime. In the 1970s, with the renewal of appreciation for Victorian architecture and decoration and the growth of historic preservation, conservation of Brumidi's work became a priority. By the time of the bicentennial of the Capitol in 1993, enough of his important work was restored to allow a valid and balanced assessment of Constantino Brumidi's remarkable art for the first time in living memory.

Notes to Chapter 12

1. Certificate of Death, District of Columbia, No. 23257, February 19, 1880.
2. Notes from February 19, 1880, from Gonzaga College Diary. "Brumidi's Funeral," *Evening Star* (Washington), February 21, 1880.
3. *Congressional Record*, 46th Cong., 2d sess., February 24, 1880, p. 1075.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 1076.
5. In March of 1879, Mrs. Lola V. Walsh secured a loan to purchase 921 G Street, N.W., USSC/MTP. Plat Book, Glenwood Cemetery, D.C., Section Q, Lot No. 70. A "First Auditor's Certificate" dated November 10, 1880, acknowledges that a sum of \$33.00 is due to Mrs. L. V. Walsh for purchasing the "burial site in Glenwood Cemetery for Constantino Brumidi deceased" NARA/RG 217. References to Edwin C. Kirkwood can be found in USSC/MTP.

6. Robert Mason, Attorney for Mrs. L. V. Walsh, to the Honorable R. M. Reynolds, First Auditor of the Treasury, November 6, 1880. Mr. Mason indicates that Mrs. Walsh has paid the burial expenses, including clothing, burial site, and undertaker fees. Mr. Mason further indicates that since Congress has approved money to cover the costs of Brumidi's burial (June 8, 1880, "AN ACT for the payment of certain moneys to the heirs of Constantino Brumidi, deceased"), Mrs. Walsh will be reimbursed by those vendors when they receive the appropriated funds. NARA/RG 217.
7. Justin Morrill to CB, June 20, 1878, USSC/MTP.
8. A medal stamped in silver with the inscription, "Premio allo Studio" (First Prize in Studies) and on the reverse, "Regio Istituto de Belle Arti in Roma" (The Royal Institute of Fine Arts in Rome) was donated to the Architect of the Capitol by Mildred Thompson. Joint Committee on the Library, 48th Cong., 1st sess., March 19, 1884, H. Rept. 390. Report to accompany H.R. 6091.
9. "Lawrence Brumidi Dead: To Be Buried Tomorrow," November 11, 1920, AOC/CO.
10. C. G. Sloan & Co., Inc, Auctioneers, Estate Sale catalogue for the week of January 26, 1925 (Washington, D.C.).
11. E. DeMerolla, Vice Consul of Italy, Baltimore, [to EC ?] February 20, 1880, AOC/CO.
12. Filippo Costaggini to "The Honorable Members of the Committee," probably the Joint Committee on the Library, from New York in March 1880; "Art and Artists." *Evening Transcript* (Boston), February 24, 1880.
13. Edward Van Reuth created a watercolor design and a large rendering in oil on canvas showing the entire Rotunda redone with stained glass and paintings by himself. See letter from his father, Felix van Reuth, to EC, August 12, 1880, AOC/CO. The paintings were donated to the Architect of the Capitol by his grandson Arthur B. Van Reuth and other descendants.
14. *Boston Advertiser*, June 18, 1880, as quoted in Dan Estes and Charles E. Lauriat, *American Art Review*, Boston, 1880.
15. Filippo Costaggini to EC, thanking him and saying that he will be ready to begin work in the Rotunda in July as requested, May 24, 1880, AOC/CO. Moving to Washington delayed the artist's start.
16. Costaggini's pen and ink scroll, 12 inches by 24 feet 6 inches, was auctioned by his grandson at the Parke-Bernet Galleries, Sale No. 2440, May 13, 1966. The cast of the Battle of the Amazons from the Temple of Minerva was ordered by EC for Costaggini from C. Cinocchio in New York, April 18, 1881.
17. William Macleod, Curator of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, to EC, February 24, 1884, mentions the sketch being finished, AOC/CO.
18. Filippo Costaggini to G. P. Wetmore, Chairman of Library Committee, June 19, 1897, AOC/CO.
19. *American Architect and Building News*, October 18, 1884, p. 181.
20. Glenn Brown erroneously gave \$10,084 as the total.
21. "Historical Frieze," *Evening Star* (Washington), May 30, 1896, and photographs of four sketches copyrighted in 1897, AOC/CO.
22. "The Abandoned Fresco of the Capitol," unidentified clipping dated February 16, 1913, AOC/CO.
23. *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, 2, no. 9, September 1914, p. 434.
24. "Death of a Great Artist," *Washington Post*, February 20, 1880; "Death of the Artist Constantino Brumidi," *Baltimore Sun*, February 20, 1880, p. 1.
25. "Death of Brumidi, the Fresco-Painter of the National Capitol," *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph*, February 19, 1880, p. 2.
26. "The Late Constantine Brumidi," *Philadelphia Daily Telegraph*, reprinted in *American Architect and Building News*, March 6, 1880.
27. "Brumidi and His Successor," *Philadelphia Daily Telegraph*, February 20, 1880, p. 4.
28. "Brumidi's Successor," *American Architect and Building News*, February 21, 1880; "The Death of Signor Brumidi," February 28, 1880; "Brumidi's Work at the Capitol in Washington," March 27, 1880.
29. *American Architect and Building News*, October 18, 1884, p. 181.
30. "American Mural Decoration," *Woman's Home Companion*, December, 1911, p. 47; "Brumidi Paintings Found in Washington After a Search of Forty Years," *Washington Star*, November 2, 1919, pp. 6-7; "Lawrence S. Brumidi Dead: To Be Buried Tomorrow," unidentified obituary, AOC/CO; "Artist is Restoring Capitol's Great Paintings," *Sunday Star* (Washington), April 13, 1919, p. 4.
31. *Congressional Record*, 71st Cong., 2d sess., January 29, 1930, p. 3.
32. Allyn Cox to Mario E. Campioli, June 16, 1963, AOC/CO.