

The Space Shuttle Challenger

(January 28, 1986)

On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded shortly after it was launched at Cape Canaveral, Florida. Aboard were commander Francis R. “Dick” Scobee, pilot Michael J. Smith, mission specialists Ellison S. Onizuka, Judith A. Resnik, and Ronald E. McNair, and payload specialists Gregory B. Jarvis and Christa McAuliffe. All seven died in the explosion. The shuttle mission was scheduled to deploy both the *Spartan-Halley* comet research observatory and a tracking and data relay satellite to provide high-capacity communications and data links.

The *Challenger* had completed nine successful missions before the January 1986 launch. McAuliffe, a school teacher from Concord, New Hampshire, was the first private citizen to fly on the shuttle. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) had proposed sending a civilian into space to build broader public support for the program, and when President Ronald Reagan announced that he wanted a teacher for the mission, more than eleven thousand applied.

Following the disaster, the president appointed a special commission of 13 distinguished engineers, test pilots, and scientists to investigate the accident. The commission determined that the cause of the accident “was the failure of the pressure seal [O-ring] in the aft field joint of the right Solid Rocket Motor.”¹ The commission’s findings went further than determining the immediate cause of the disaster, concluding that there had been “a serious flaw in the decision making process” leading to the *Challenger’s* launch.² The presidential commission also made a number of major recommendations to NASA, which included redesigning the solid rocket booster and changing the shuttle program’s management structure.

To honor the seven crew members of the space shuttle *Challenger*, Republican Leader Robert Dole of Kansas and Democratic Leader Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia proposed that a commemorative mural be placed in the Senate wing of the U.S. Capitol. The Senate Commission on Art, with the recommendation of a five-member advisory panel composed of museum professionals from the Smithsonian Institution, NASA, and the U.S. Capitol, selected Philadelphia artist Charles Schmidt for the commission. Schmidt’s completed mural was placed in an empty oval in the Brumidi Corridors on the first floor of the Capitol’s Senate wing, and unveiled on March 3, 1987.

The Brumidi Corridors, a series of ornate muralled hallways, were designed by Italian artist Constantino Brumidi. Inspired by Raphael’s loggia in the Vatican, the walls and ceilings depict American themes and subjects and include historical scenes, important personages, images of American culture, and native flora and fauna. The decorative painting of the corridors began in late 1857, but the project was never completed; a number of ovals and diamonds throughout the hallways were left blank. Some of these empty spaces have been filled by 20th-century artists, most notably Allyn Cox, who completed *America’s First Moon Landing* in 1974 (p. 16). *The Space Shuttle Challenger* mural, which was placed directly across from Cox’s work, depicts the seven astronauts in space suits, grouped in front of the space shuttle, poised on its launch pad. Christa McAuliffe, the New Hampshire school teacher, carries a globe in her arms.

A professor of painting and drawing at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia, Schmidt has received numerous painting commissions and awards. His work has been included in national and international exhibitions, and he is represented in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, NASA, and the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

The Space Shuttle Challenger
Charles Schmidt (born 1939)

Oil on canvas applied to wall, 1987

50 x 36 inches (oval) (127 x 91.4 cm)

Signed and dated (lower right): Charles Schmidt 1987

Commissioned by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 1986

Accepted by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 1987

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