

The Capitol Dome Commission

The design process for the composition of the dome painting went through several stages before Brumidi developed the final study, which resides in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The artist made two prior studies before coming to the third and final composition. With this last concept, Brumidi was finally able to realize the mural's circular composition and convey it on a smaller study canvas. In the third and final study, Washington is placed just below the center. The **allegorical** group of the original thirteen states provides a counterbalance on the opposite side of the dome, so at dead center is a golden-bathed sky. The figural groups that form the edge of the canvas are more fully developed in this third and final study, with all continuing to highlight American achievements in innovation, technology and agriculture, among others.

Brumidi would have been acquainted with the concept of an **apotheosis** from his time studying classical art in Europe. Additionally the concept of George Washington's apotheosis was not new, for it had been illustrated in prints and engravings by many artists decades before Brumidi started to paint the Capitol dome. Yet the dome painting presented significant differences and



[Study for the Apotheosis of Washington in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol Building](#) detail, 1859-1862, Constantino Brumidi, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

challenges for Brumidi not encountered by any previous artists; namely, the scale of the artwork and the difficulty of executing a painting on a concave surface that made sense to the viewer no matter where they stood on the floor below the dome.

On September 8, 1862 Brumidi submitted his design to **Thomas U. Walter**, Architect of the Capitol, "for the **fresco** picture to be painted on the Canopy of the New Dome of the United States Capitol. . . . As this picture will be seen at a height of 180 ft. the painting must be of the most decided character possible. It will cover 4664 sq. ft.

and will be worth \$50,000 to execute including the necessary cartoons and every expense pertaining to the painting."

Brumidi's final design was approved by Walter, yet the approval came with one condition: Brumidi would have to execute the painting for a significantly lower price. Walter attempted to

convince Brumidi that although his initial price had not been accepted, there were other merits to completing the job for a lower price:

I am aware, as you have expressed to me in conversation that there is no picture in the world that will compare with this in magnitude and in difficulty of execution. Being painted on a concave surface, and I am also aware that it covers about eight times more surface than Mr. Leutze's picture which cost \$20,000. . . . Should you execute this work it will be the great work of your life: it will therefore be worth on your part some sacrifice to accomplish so great an achievement.

By the end of December, Brumidi agreed to the lower asking price of \$40,000 in order to expedite a settlement and begin work on the fresco as soon as possible. On March 11, 1863, Thomas U. Walter wrote to Brumidi to inform him that he could start work on the dome painting immediately.

We know that Brumidi's work on the dome was underway shortly after November 1863, for in the Capitol's Annual Report dated the first of that month, it is stated that the **cartoons** for the fresco are being prepared and "its execution will be commenced as soon as the iron work . . . can be put in place." However, a series of bureaucratic delays and the delay of the completion of the iron framework for the dome delayed Brumidi's start of the fresco until 1865. When he did finally start the fresco, the speed at which he covered the 4,664 square feet of the dome was remarkable; the fresco painting was completed in just eleven months.

At the center of the dome fresco painting, Brumidi has depicted America's first president George Washington in full military regalia. The lavender cloth draped across his lap is evocative of the classical drapery found in the classical sculpture of Ancient Greece; the democratic society on which the American government was modeled. In a letter to Thomas U. Walter, Brumidi discussed the other main design elements in his final design: "The six groups around the border represent as you will see, War, Science, Marine, Commerce, Manufactures, and Agriculture. The leading figures will measure [*sic*] some 16 feet. In the centre [*sic*] is an Apotheosis of Washington, surrounded by allegorical figures, and the 13 original Sister States." The act of apotheosizing Washington effectively raised the nation's first president to the rank of a god and glorified him as the ideal American – a standard to which it was believed that all Americans should strive to achieve. The apotheosis cemented George Washington's image as national icon.

For further information on the symbolism and representations of American values and progress that Constantino Brumidi weaved throughout the fresco painting, visit the Architect of the

Capitol's interactive website at: <http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/other-paintings-and-murals/apotheosis-washington>

Glossary

allegorical: the expression of symbols through figures or events that stand for ideas about human life or for a historical or political situation.

apotheosis: the elevation or exaltation of a person to divine status.

cartoons: full-sized preparatory drawings, designs, or paintings for a fresco from which the final work is traced or copied.

fresco: a painting that is done on wet plaster. This technique was popular to paint large murals. From the Italian word *fresco*, meaning fresh.

Horatio Greenough: (1805-1852) American sculptor who worked almost exclusively for the United States government. He is best known for his controversial sculpture of a toga-clad George Washington, based on a statue of the Greek god Zeus by ancient Greek sculptor Phidias.

Thomas U. Walter: (1804-1887) The fourth Architect of the Capitol, who was responsible for and oversaw the design and construction of the Senate and House wings and the dome of the U.S. Capitol Building.