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Cultural Politics in the United States Capitol: The Case of Constantino Brumidi (1805–1880)

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"When the query is propounded: What is Nationality in Art? We are not readily answered," the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* noted in 1857.

> The hills, and valleys, and cities, and ships, are all American; but is there anything in them to render their reproduction on canvas peculiar? … a hill is a hill whether painted by a Dutchman or a Frenchman, and a face is a face whether painted by Raphael or West.

Do national characteristics arise from the influence of the *locus quo*, or do they reflect the artist's taste? Does nationalism in art result from the nationality of the artist? "Paul Delaroche, or David, would have painted Washington as grandly as they delineated the first Napoleon, and would have been as truly American with the one as French with the other."[1] In mid-century America, the debate about nationality in art was not merely an aesthetic *querelle*; it was a political issue that reached to the highest levels of the federal government. At the center of the controversy was the appointment of the Roman fresco painter Constantino Brumidi (1805–1880) to decorate the interior of the new wings of the Capitol (Fig. 1). Between 1855 and 1860, Brumidi's role as chief muralist generated scandal in the press, anger from artists, opposition from members of Congress, and ultimately intervention by the President of the United States. Overshadowed by the Civil War, this political skirmish has rarely attracted the attention of historians. However, the case of Constantino Brumidi demonstrates how political factions vied to control national identity through state-sponsored works of art during a period when the United States was

breaking apart. The Capitol became a battleground where two concepts of nationalism fought to determine the master narrative of American history and who was, or could be, an American.

Fig. 1. *Constantino Brumidi* (1805–1880), photograph. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

National symbols may be literally fixed in stone, but nationalism is a malleable ideology that is reconstructed to meet the exigencies of historical change. In the first half of the nineteenth century, two distinct concepts of nationalism developed in the United States: civic nationalism, established during the Federal Era (1790–1830); and ethnic nationalism, which emerged during the Jacksonian Era (1828–1854). While both types of nationalism reflected parallel international movements, they were shaped by the unique conditions of the United States.

Founded during the Enlightenment, the United States of America emulated the government, civic architecture, and political iconography of the Roman Republic. To convince the ethnically diverse population of the American colonies to unite against the British monarchy, the Founders revived the Roman concept of citizenship, which subsumed ethnic and sectarian loyalties into a civic identity. Anticipating that immigration would be required for the country to grow, they included "obstructing the Laws of the Naturalization of foreigners" among their grievances in the Declaration of Independence in 1776.[2] To represent the international composition of the new nation, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin called upon the Swiss artist Pierre du Simitière (1737–1784) to design an official seal of the United States with the motto *e pluribus unum*, "out of many, one."[3] Du Simitière proposed a shield under the Eye of Providence with emblems of the "countries from which these States have been peopled"———England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, France, and Holland———flanked by the allegorical figure of *Columbia* and an American rifleman.[4] Although du Simitière's design was not approved, it attests to the original multi-ethnic concept of American nationalism. Jupiter's eagle, a *signa militaria* according to Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 10.6), with thirteen arrows instead of thunderbolts in its talons, became the emblem of the Great Seal in 1782.[5]

While the Constitution of 1789 conferred citizenship on the native-born and provided a naturalization process for immigrants, the social contract alone was not sufficient to generate bonds of national loyalty in what Benedict Anderson termed an "imagined political community."[6] The political revolution necessitated a cultural revolution to transform the consciousness of people who were literally the subjects of a king one day and the citizens of a republic the next. As Barbara Borngässer observed, "American Neoclassicism became the flagbearer for republican ideology."[7] During the decade leading up to the Revolution, Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams spent years in Paris and London, where they observed the classical revival displacing the rococo culture of the aristocracy. After Washington, who did not have a formal education, the first five presidents from John Adams to John Quincy Adams were classically educated college

graduates on a par with the European intelligentsia. Not only the landed gentry but also the general population, who had higher rates of literacy than most of Continental Europe, were exposed to classicism in the early nineteenth century.[8] "Most influential, because most widely dispersed, was the staggering quantity of classical imagery that saturated American newspapers, prints, broadsides, pamphlets, and civic iconography," Caroline Winterer noted. "These were so commonplace as to become unremarkable. Minerva, Columbia, Ceres, Mercury, and Hercules symbolized the virtues of the new Republic: liberty, martial valor, agricultural fecundity, commerce, the path of public virtue over private vice."[9] In the public sphere, the national lineage was authenticated with historical and mythological references to Roman Antiquity. Eric Hobsbawn described this political pattern as "the invention of tradition," a process of legitimization by "giving the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history."[10]

Despite the abundance of printed classical imagery, the lack of professional architects and sculptors who could give American iconography permanent form forced the government to rely on French and Italian neoclassical artists. After the Treaty of Paris officially ended the War of Independence in 1783, Benjamin Franklin commissioned the *Libertas Americana* medal for Revolutionary War officers from the French sculptor Clodion (1738–1814), who depicted Minerva fighting the lion of Britain while the infant Hercules, as young America, strangles the serpents of tyranny. That same year, American and French officers of the Continental Army founded the *Society of the Cincinnati* to honor General Washington for resigning his military commission after the war and returning to farming, like Cincinnatus, the agrarian-statesman of the Roman Republic. The famous French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828) made Roman-style portrait busts of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and other American leaders. He was commissioned to produce a life-size marble statue of Washington for the Virginia State House, which Jefferson had designed in collaboration with French architect Charles-Louis Clérisseau (1721–1820) to emulate the *Maison Carrée*, a Roman Temple in Nimes. Houdon portrayed Washington as an American Cincinnatus in contemporary dress leaning on a fasces, the Roman symbol of strength through unity, which was widely adopted as a civic motif. Once a location on the Potomac River was agreed upon for the seat of government, the military engineer Pierre-Charles L'Enfant (1754–1825), who had studied at the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* before fighting in the American Revolution alongside General Washington at Valley Forge, offered to design the Federal City. His plan of 1791 evoked ancient Rome by positioning the Congress House on the high ground——— "a pedestal awaiting a monument"——— like the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus that stood on the Capitoline Hill, above a little stream that was called Tiber Creek. But the radiating boulevards leading to the Capitol were clearly inspired by Versailles.

Arriving in 1791, Roman Giuseppe Ceracchi (1751–1830) was the first of the Italian sculptors in the United States. A passionate supporter of the American Republic, he sculpted classical busts of the Founders and the Italian explorers Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci, and he made a model for a monumental bust of *Minerva as the*

Patroness of American Liberty. During the Jefferson Administration, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the Anglo-American architect of the Capitol (1764–1820; dates of service 1803–1817), planned an elaborate sculptural program that required importing sculptors. On the recommendation of Jefferson's friend, the Tuscan physician Filippo Mazzei, Latrobe extended government patronage to Giovanni Andrei (1770–1824), Francisco Iardella (1793–1831), Giuseppe Franzoni (1780–1815), and Carlo Franzoni (1788–1819), sculptors from the marble region of Carrara. At the Capitol they executed statues, pediments, and classical architectural ornaments that Latrobe "Americanized" with regional flora and fauna: tobacco leaf and corncob capitals; a bald eagle instead of a Roman *aquila*. Carlo Franzoni carved the allegorical "Car of History" (Fig. 2) for the House Chamber depicting Clio, the muse of History, recording events from a winged chariot emblazoned with a profile portrait of Washington. A clock-face with Roman numerals is centered in the chariot wheel poised above a celestial globe. Unfortunately, much of the Italian sculptors' monumental work was destroyed when the British burned the Capitol during the War of 1812. Antonio Canova's (1757–1822) long-anticipated sculpture of George Washington, in Roman military armor writing his letter of resignation (1818), suffered a similar fate at the North Carolina State House and perished in a fire in 1831.

Fig. 2. Carlo Franzoni, *The Car of History*. 1819. Marble. National Statuary Hall. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

The iconographic program of the Capitol Rotunda marked the decline of Neoclassicism and the ideals of civic nationalism as the nation expanded westward away from the cosmopolitan culture of the east. Initially, Capitol architect Charles Bulfinch (1763–1844; dates of service 1818–1829) planned the neoclassical architecture of the Rotunda to celebrate the founding of the Republic with monumental history paintings, four of which were scenes of the Revolutionary War by the American artist John Trumbull (1756–1843). Bulfinch commissioned the Florentine Antonio Capellano (1780–1840) and the Veronese Enrico Causici (1790–1835) to sculpt sandstone reliefs with eagles on fasces above two entrances to the Rotunda (Fig. 3). But in the early 1820s, he replaced the Roman symbolism with reliefs of American colonists' encounters with Indians at each entrance: *The Preservation of Captain Smith by Pocahontas,1606* by Capellano (Fig. 4); and *The Landing of the Pilgrims, 1620* (Fig. 5) and *The Conflict of Daniel Boone and the Indians, 1773* by Causici. The French sculptor Nicholas Gevelot contributed the relief of *William Penn's Treaty with the Indians, 1682*. Bulfinch's reason for abandoning the traditional neoclassical iconography was not made explicit, but the architect's decisions required the approval of the Commissioners of Public Buildings. Observing that Congressional debates on the "Indian Problem" occurred at the time, Vivien Green Fryd surmised that the portrayal of negative racial stereotypes in the reliefs supported Indian relocation.[11]

Fig. 3. Walls of the Rotunda of the United States Capitol, Washington DC. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

Fig. 4. Antonio Capellano, *Preservation of Captain Smith by Pocahontas, 1606*. 1825. Sandstone. U.S. Capitol Rotunda, above west door. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

Fig. 5. Enrico Causici, *Landing of the Pilgrims, 1620*. 1825. Sandstone. U.S. Capitol Rotunda, above east door. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

Between 1824 and 1829, Bulfinch further extended the historical theme to the walls above Trumbull's paintings with frieze-like panels commemorating European explorers with inscribed busts in wreaths: Christopher Columbus, John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto), and René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, were sculpted by Capellano and Causici, and Sir Walter Raleigh by Francisco Iardella. Incorporating the explorers into the Rotunda program announced a revision in national identity. Instead of celebrating the United States as the progeny of the Roman Republic, the Rotunda reliefs recast America as the descendant of the European empires that colonized the New World.

John Quincy Adams, the last in the presidential dynasty of Founding Fathers, commissioned the *Genius of America* (1825–1828) for the east portico of the Capitol from the Neapolitan Luigi Persico (1791–1860). The neoclassical allegory included personifications of *America* with a shield, an eagle, and an altar inscribed "July 4, 1776," *Justice* holding scales and the Constitution, and *Hercules* symbolizing strength. But at this critical moment in the Republic, Adams was not content to glorify the past; he replaced Hercules with the Christian personification of "Hope in Providence for the future." In the election of 1828, the learned Adams, a defender of Indian rights, was defeated by the unschooled Andrew Jackson, the champion of the common man, thereby ensuring the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830. The territorial conflicts between immigrants and Indians exposed the contradictions inherent in American principles of government since its inception: the Constitution had restricted citizenship to "free white persons" in order to exclude the indigenous and enslaved populations.[12]

From 1830 to 1850, American culture was increasingly under the spell of the Romantic concept of ethnic nationalism, the belief, according to John Higham, "that a nation fulfilled itself through the endogenous forces within its own language and history."[13] Ethnic nationalism supported the nation-building aspirations of homogeneous societies like Italy and Germany, where Herder and Hegel formulated the concept of the *Volkgeist*. But "American" was a nationality, not an ethnicity. Nevertheless, distilled from the common features of the predominant northern European population, American ethnicity was white, native-born, and Protestant.

After more than forty years of dependence on Italian sculptors at the Capitol, the nationality of artists became a matter of national pride. In 1834, Henry A. Wise, a Jacksonian Democrat Representative from Virginia, lobbied Congress to commission the remaining paintings for the Rotunda, stating, "We have frequently employed foreign artists, sir, and at great expense, and I now desire very much to see if America cannot bestow her favors and lawful patronage in such a manner on American artists."[14] While

Congress controlled the purse, many representatives had different priorities or a Protestant tendency to regard works of art as papist; others understood the propaganda value of images. In 1836, Wise persuaded Congress to fund history paintings by Americans with subjects similar to the Rotunda reliefs: *The Landing of Columbus* by John Vanderlyn, *The Baptism of Pocahontas* by John Chapman, *The Embarkation of the Pilgrims* by Robert W. Weir, and *DeSoto Discovering the Mississippi ad 1541* by William H. Powell.[15]

Expressing the American *Volkgeist* became a national preoccupation. "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe," Ralph Waldo Emerson lamented in 1836.[16] Artists responded by painting American landscapes and American genre scenes in the 1840s and 1850s. The English critic John Ruskin's nationalist theory of architecture, published in "The Poetry of Architecture; or the architecture of the nations of Europe, considered in its association with natural scenery and national character" in 1837, had a great influence on his American readers.[17] A nationalistic aesthetic by definition entailed the rejection of a cosmopolitan concept of art that the Gothic Revival landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–1852) found absurd. In 1851, he chided his countrymen's "disdain for anything foreign":

What they demand, with their brows lowered and their hands clenched, is an "American style of architecture!" As if an architecture sprang up like the aftergrowth in our forests, the natural and immediate consequence of clearing the soil. As if a people, not even indigenous to the country, but wholly European colonists or their descendants, a people who have neither a new language nor religion, who wear the fashions of Paris, who in their highest education hang on Greece and Rome, were likely to invent (as if it were a new plow) an altogether novel and satisfactory style of architecture.[18]

From 1848 to 1849, revolutionary movements generated by ethnic nationalism erupted all over Europe. Impoverished Irish Catholics suffering from the potato famine and British oppression began immigrating to America even before the Young Irelander Revolution was put down in 1848. After the short-lived March Revolution in Germany failed, German liberals fled to the United States. Italian Unification made great strides in achieving liberal reforms with the blessing of Pope Pius IX, who granted constitutional rights to the Papal States in 1848. But when he refused to support war against the Austrian Empire, his Minister of Justice was assassinated, and he fled to Gaeta. The first Roman Republic was proclaimed in February 1849, but by July it had been overthrown by the combined efforts of the French and Austrian monarchs. The pope returned to Rome as a reactionary, compromising the legal status of the members of the republican Civic Guard, one of whom was the artist Constantino Brumidi.

Born in Rome on 26 July 1805, Constantino was the offspring of a Greek father, Stauro Brumidi, and an Italian mother, Anna Maria Bianchini. His parents owned a coffee shop on Via Tor di'Conti. A precocious talent, he was accepted to the prestigious Accademia di San Luca at the age of thirteen, where he studied with the neoclassical painters Vincenzo Camuccini (1774–1844) and Filippo Agricola (1776–1857) and the sculptors Antonio

Canova (1757–1822) and his protégé Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844).[19] Brumidi's mastery of painting media and techniques made him one of the most admired artists in Rome. Beginning in 1836, he worked for the wealthy Torlonia family, decorating the throne room and chapel in Palazzo Torlonia on Piazza Venezia.[20] In 1844–1845, he designed frescoes *all'antica* in the theatre of Villa Torlonia on Via Nomentana (Fig. 6). [21] During the pontificate of Gregory XVI, Brumidi was one of the artists commissioned to restore sixteenth-century frescoes in the Third Loggia (the *Loggia della Cosmografia*) of the Vatican Palace. His relationship with the papacy continued in 1847 with portraits of the newly elevated Pius IX.[22] After the collapse of the Roman Republic, repressive measures resulted in Brumidi's arrest, trial, and imprisonment on false charges for his role in the Civic Guard. After thirteen months in prison, and petitions attesting to his innocence, he pleaded with Pius IX to let him go to the United States and was granted a pardon in 1852.

Fig. 6. Internal stairs of Theatre of Villa Torlonia with frescos made by Costantino Brumidi (1844–1845), Nomentano, Rome, Lazio, Italy. AGE footstock.

One of the many "Forty-Eighters" to emigrate from Europe, Brumidi arrived in New York in September 1852, and by November he had applied for citizenship. At that time, the Nativist Party was attempting to extend the naturalization process from 5 to 21 years to prevent the massive influx of Catholic immigrants from voting and holding elected office. Conspiracy theories published by Samuel F.B. Morse (1791–1872), a painter and inventor of the telegraph,[23] and numerous tracts of "evangelical bigotry," alleged that Catholic immigration was a papal plot to destroy American democracy.[24] Suspicions were aroused in 1852 when Pius IX had a marble slab from the Temple of Concord engraved *A Roma Americae* and donated it to the construction of the Washington Monument. On 6 March 1854, members of the vigilante "Know-Nothing" branch of the Nativists, stole the pope's stone and threw it in the Potomac River.[25] Reviled for his betrayal of the fledging Roman Republic in 1849, Pius IX was a target of American political cartoons. "The Propagation Society. More free than welcome" (1855) shows the pope as a conqueror wielding a cross and a sword as the Yankee "Brother Jonathon" leans against a flag-pole and "Young America," a boy with a Bible, declares he is "determined to Know Nothing" but this book" (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7. *The Propagation Society. More free than welcome.* 1855. N. Currier. Library of Congress.

In 1850, Congress agreed to enlarge the Capitol to accommodate the representatives of the increasing number of states. President Franklin Pierce (1853–1857) placed the Capitol's construction under the jurisdiction of Jefferson Davis, Secretary of War. Davis appointed fellow West Point graduate Montgomery C. Meigs (1816–1892) Supervising Engineer of the Capitol Extension in 1853, a responsibility Meigs welcomed. He had developed a passion for art at West Point Military Academy, where he studied with the artist Seth Eastman (1808–1875) and visited the art collection of the cosmopolitan New

York congressman Gouverneur Kemble. Meigs, rather than the architect, Thomas Ustick Walter (1804–1887), would control the interior decoration. He was disinclined to continue the sedate décor of the Rotunda with its oversize easel paintings on white walls. Both President Pierce and Secretary Davis agreed that the renovated Capitol should be sumptuously decorated to represent the grandeur of the nation. When a congressman balked at the "wasteful extravagance" and "departure from republican simplicity," Davis replied, "Sir, the sovereign people deserve as good a house as any man who was ever born a monarch."[26]

Since Walter's plans to erect a colossal dome like St. Peter's in Rome or St. Paul's in London on the new building would change its style from neoclassical to Renaissance, Meigs was considering fresco decoration for the interior. Unfortunately, there were no American artists trained in the technique. So, when the neoclassical sculptor Horatio Stone introduced Meigs to the Italian fresco painter Brumidi, Meigs was excited by the possibilities of commissioning the first fresco paintings in the United States. In January of 1855, he requested that Brumidi demonstrate his fresco technique by painting the east lunette in the Agricultural Committee Room. "As he was a Roman (expatriated for his share in this last revolution), I suggested Cincinnatus called from the plough to defend his country," Meigs later explained, "a favorite subject with all educated Americans who associate that name with the Father of our Country."[27] According to Livy (*History of Rome* 3.26), Cincinnatus was called away from his farm on the Tiber to serve as military dictator in a time of crisis in 457 bc. Brumidi was familiar with the story, which was often depicted by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century neoclassical painters.[28] His version of *The Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow* (Fig. 8) portrayed the citizen-soldier clad in a white tunic and red toga centered between the private and public spheres of his life. On the right, his farm is represented with yoked oxen, a boy (with the face of Meigs's son) holding a dog, and a rake on which the artist signed his name; on the left, a delegation of lictors carry the fasces, and a priest offers Cincinnatus a helmet and sword, while a state vessel on the bank of the Tiber waits to transport him to the city of Rome on the distant horizon. Impressed with Brumidi's performance, Meigs commissioned him to complete the room. He composed the west lunette as a pendant with *The Calling of Putnam from the Plow to the Revolution*, honoring the "Connecticut Cincinnatus," Israel Putnam, who left his farm to lead the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775.[29]

Fig. 8. Constantino Brumidi, *The Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow*.Fresco. House Appropriations Committee Room (H-144). Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol

In the spandrels on the adjacent walls, Brumidi designed tributes to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who were known for their scientific interest in agriculture. On the north wall, an octagonal relief portrait of Washington in *trompe l'oeil* was garlanded with colorful fruits and flanked by personifications of *America*, an Indian princess with a feather headdress and a bow and quiver representing the North American continent, and *Columbia*, a classical maiden holding the American flag representing the United States government (Fig. 9). On the south wall, Jefferson's portrait was accompanied by

personifications of *Peace*, extending an olive branch, and *Liberty*, in a Phrygian cap receiving a tablet with the Law from a putto. Beneath these allegorical compositions, Brumidi frescoed *quadri riportati* landscapes depicting technological progress in American agriculture: under Washington's portrait, *Cutting Grain with a Sickle*, a scene of field-hands; and under Jefferson's, *Harvesting Grain with a McCormick Reaper*, a single farmer using the horse-drawn mechanical device invented in 1821.[30]

Fig. 9. Constantino Brumidi, *Indian Princess and Columbia*, 1855–1856. Agricultural Committee Room (H-144). The Picture Art Collection/Alamy Stock Photo.

In the tradition of Baroque villas, Brumidi frescoed the ceiling with an allegory of the *Four Seasons*. Dividing the vault into quadrants with ornate fictive molding, he painted the Roman deities Flora (spring), Ceres (summer), Bacchus (autumn), and Boreas (winter) along with putti floating on clouds in a neoclassical style reminiscent of Giuseppe Maria Terreni's *Sala delle Quattro Stagioni* (1778) at Villa Poggio Imperiale in Florence.

When the Agricultural Committee Room was completed in April 1856, it created a sensation. House members and the public rushed to see the first "frescoed chamber" in the United States.[31] In August, the New York *Courier and Enquirer* reported that "the designs with which its walls and ceilings are covered, as well as its execution, have been greatly and deservedly admired," and it predicted that "the whole edifice, when finished will be worthy of the mighty nation that laid its foundation." The vast sums of money appropriated for the Capitol Extension were well spent since a taste for "sumptuous architecture … has justly been regarded as the peculiar characteristic and proof of advanced civilization."[32] On the wave of enthusiasm for the Agricultural Committee Room, Meigs appointed Brumidi chief designer of the Capitol Extensions, paid him at the same *per diem* rate as a congressman, and allowed him to hire painters and craftsmen as assistants.[33]

In the general approbation, Meigs may have underestimated the reaction of American painters to Brumidi's appointment. A critical review appeared in the October 1856 issue of *The Crayon* complaining that a panel in the House of Representatives featured "the history of ancient Rome, all being painted by modern Italian artists." American painters were available to illustrate "the present characteristics of our country," which could be executed by the "same fresco-painters" currently working at the Capitol. "We maintain, therefore, that capable artists at home should be sought out and employed."[34]

Unfazed by the criticism, Brumidi next frescoed the Senate Naval Affairs Committee Room in the Pompeian Style, in which he had painted the theatre of Villa Torlonia a decade earlier (Fig. 10). To express the room's mariner theme, he depicted Neptune (Fig. 11), Amphitrite, and other Roman water deities floating on bright blue walls, ornamented with putti holding nautical instruments and shields and with American bald eagles perching along the ceiling. The white-ground vault with trellis-work evoked one of the bays in Giovanni da Udine's garden loggia (c. 1521) at Villa Madama in Rome. The

National Intelligencer praised the "unique room" as 'tastefully and fittingly frescoed."[35] While Brumidi provided a key to the mythological imagery for the edification of visitors, a tidal wave of criticism was mounting against the artist.[36]

Fig. 10. Constantino Brumidi, Naval Affairs Committee Room (S-127). Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

Fig. 11. Constantino Brumidi, *Neptune*. Naval Affairs Committee Room (S-127). Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

Most Americans had no frame of reference for the Pompeiian style and were shocked by the intense color. Benjamin Poore, Washington correspondent for the Boston *Journal*, wrote that the decorations were "designed and executed by a troop of Germans and Italians who had only been accustomed to decorate coffee-houses and dance-halls at home."[37] The disappointed *Independent* had expected a historical program to generate national pride: "Have we no naval history? Were there no naval victories or discoveries to celebrate? … Was there nothing in American history to save these Christian walls from an eruption of stale mythology?"[38] A scathing commentary in the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* referred to Brumidi as an "Italian, whose reputation is little better than a scene painter, and who employs under him a crowd of sixty or seventy foreign painters, chiefly Italians and Frenchmen." Actually, the majority of Brumidi's assistants were German and Forty-Eighters like himself.[39]

The barrage of insults that Brumidi had to endure frustrated Meigs, because it could not be resolved. The two forms of nationalism had mutually exclusive political values—one cosmopolitan, the other provincial. Responding to the demand for "American" subjects, Meigs arranged for Brumidi to paint historical scenes on the walls of the House of Representatives in 1857. Brumidi designed a less well-known event of the Revolutionary War: *Cornwallis Sues for Cessation of Hostilities under the Flag of Truce* in which General Washington diplomatically manipulated Lord Cornwallis into surrendering in 1781 (Fig. 12). Painted in a prosaic manner, the scene still managed to offend some representatives, who wanted the fresco "wiped out."[40] Why did they reject the painting? Barbara Wolanin pointed out that "on the strap of the dispatch case, Brumidi proudly signed "C. Brumidi Artist Citizen of the U.S." because he had recently received his naturalization papers.[41] That a foreigner had obtained citizenship and could now vote would certainly enrage the Nativists in the Congress. Perhaps the image of James Armistead, the slave who spied for the Continental Army at Yorktown, at the far right behind an officer, was intolerable to the pro-slavery factions.[42] The Dred Scott case decided in March may have inspired Brumidi's racially charged subject later in the year. In any event, he was banned from painting in the House Chamber again.

Fig. 12. Constantino Brumidi, *Cornwallis sues for Cessation of Hostilities under the Flag of Truce*. Fresco. 1857. Members' Dining Room, House of Representatives, U.S. Capitol. Courtesy of the

Architect of the Capitol.

While each new painting style he introduced created a stir, Brumidi seemed determined to transplant the historical styles of Rome into the barren soil of Washington DC. The five featureless hallways on the first floor of the Senate wing presented a challenging design problem. Although solid white or colored walls would not have created a ripple of protest among the senators, many of whom were used to the blank walls of their churches and meeting-houses, Brumidi ingeniously reimagined them as the loggias of Raphael in the Vatican Palace (Fig. 13). Prized in the eighteenth century by the European aristocracy on the Continent, the fashion for *grottesche* in the muted rococo palette of Robert Adam was also popular in the United States during the Federal era. Brumidi's version was closer to the Renaissance in the richness of detail.

Fig. 13. Constantino Brumidi, View of the Corridor, First floor, Senate Wing, U.S. Capitol. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

The walls and ceilings were embellished with *grottesche* and arabesques that incorporated American political iconography, portraits of historical figures, and inventions. Since the corridor vaulting did not provide lunettes to paint narratives in the manner of "Raphael's Bible," Brumidi designed historical and allegorical scenes in medallions in the vaults and over the office doorways. Like the naturalistic animals attributed to Giovanni da Udine in the Loggia of Raphael in the Vatican Palace (Fig. 14), Brumidi incorporated American species of fruit, flowers, insects, and animals (e.g., a curious squirrel) into the arabesque (Fig. 15) as well as exotic birds (e.g., parrots) (Fig. 16). The vault of one corridor was ornamented with the signs of the Zodiac (Fig. 17).

Fig. 14. Vatican City, Vatican Apostolic Palace, Loggia of Raphael. Giovanni da Udine (1487–1564), Grotesque, 1517–1519. Fresco. Alamy Stock Photo.

Fig. 15. Constantino Brumidi, *Squirrel*. 1857–1859. First floor, Senate Wing, U.S. Capitol. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

Fig. 16. Constantino Brumidi, *Parrot*. 1857–1859. First floor, Senate Wing, U.S. Capitol. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

Fig. 17. Constantino Brumidi, *Zodiac Corridor*. 1857–1859. First floor, Senate Wing, U.S. Capitol. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

Paved with Minton tile floors imitating marble mosaic, the corridors were dazzling or disorienting, depending on the viewer. Predictably, Benjamin Poore attacked the foreign artists while being fascinated by their imagination:

> … on one hand may be seen a group of imported artists adorning the walls and ceilings with groups of figures, animate and inanimate————duopedal, quadepedal, and multipedal ————representing objects in heaven and on earth, and some which have no existence beyond the fertile brain of the delineator …[43]

But the criticism of the Senate corridors in the press was not more severe than Ruskin's diatribe against the "grotesque Renaissance" in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853). While acknowledging that Raphael's loggia was the high point of the grotesque style, he condemned the productions of decorative art that, "over the whole of civilized Europe, have sprung from this poisonous root; an artistical pottage, composed of nymphs, cupids, and satyrs, with shreddings of heads and paws of meek wild beasts, and nondescript vegetables."[44]

After the Panic of 1857 precipitated a downturn in the economy, pressure mounted to replace the immigrant artists with Americans. "During this xenophobic period in 1858," Vivien Green Fryd notes, "nearly one hundred American artists protested in a memorial to Congress against the hiring of foreigners like Constantino Brumidi."[45] In June of that year, the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* published a polemic that employed religious rhetoric to alert readers to the violation of the national soul by foreigners. The Capitol was being "desecrated by an army of third-rate imported Italian painters, whose daubs are only calculated to excite derision from every person of taste and patriotism," and "if the authorities do not interfere to stay the sacrilege, it will be for the reason that Italians and mythology are preferred to Americans and records of our national history."[46] In 1859, the Nativist faction in the Congress passed legislation to prohibit further painting of the Capitol and to establish the United States Art Commission with three American artists to oversee the decorations. On Washington's birthday in 1860, the commission, composed of the landscape painter John F. Kensett, the portrait painter James Lambdin, and the sculptor Henry Kirke Brown, issued their report:

We are shown in the Capitol a room in the style of the Loggia of Raphael; another in that of Pompeii; a third after the manner of the Baths of Titus; and even in the rooms where American subjects have been attempted, they are so foreign in treatment, so overlaid and subordinated by symbols and impertinent ornaments, that we hardly recognize them.[47]

Insofar as the alien style could not fulfill the mission of "giving expression to subjects of national interest," it threatened the future of art in America:

Art, like nations, has its heroic history, its refined and manly history, its effeminate and sensuous history—the sure presage of national decay. Our art is just entering upon the first of these planes. Shall we allow it to be supplanted here in its young life by that of an effete and decayed race, which in no way represents us?[48]

The United States Art Commission demanded the appropriation of funds to purchase paintings for the Capitol exclusively from Americans artists. But at this juncture, with the secession crisis and looming war, fiscal prudence outweighed ethnic prejudice. President

James Buchanan abolished the commission in June and reinstated Brumidi's workshop in July of 1860.

The following year, after a decade of contentious debate and civil unrest, slavery split the Republic. The two men responsible for pushing through the Capitol renovations went separate ways: Senator Jefferson Davis, a southerner, became president of the Confederacy; and Captain Montgomery C. Meigs, a northerner, was appointed Quartermaster General of the Union Army by the newly elected President Abraham Lincoln. Despite the outbreak of the Civil War, Lincoln authorized construction to continue on the unfinished dome. Brumidi continued to work at the Capitol for the next twenty years. He produced two major works for the Rotunda: a frieze in grisaille of twenty episodes in American history from 1492 to 1848; and *The Apotheosis of Washington* in the eye of the dome.

From 1862 to 1865, he executed *The Apotheosis of Washington*, a fresco in the dome 180 feet above the Rotunda floor[49] (Fig. 18). The composition of concentric tiers of clouds with a solar center echoed Antonio da Correggio's *Assumption of the Virgin* fresco (1526–1530) in the dome of the Cathedral of Parma. In Brumidi's interpretation of Washington, the Founding Father, seated in the Sun, takes on the celestial iconography of God the Father (Fig. 19). Seated on an invisible throne and holding a sword pointed down, he is accompanied by Liberty and Victory and the Thirteen Colonies with a banner inscribed *e pluribus unum*. On the perimeter cloud banks are Roman deities and famous Americans representing the cultural infrastructure of the Republic: Commerce (Mercury), Marine (Neptune), Science (Minerva), War (Bellona), Agriculture (Ceres), and Mechanics (Vulcan).

Fig. 18.Constantino Brumidi, *Apotheosis of Washington*. 1860–1865.
Dome of the Rotunda, U.S. Capitol. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

Fig. 19. Constantino Brumidi, *War*, detail. *Apotheosis of Washington: War*.1860–1865. Dome of the U.S. Capitol. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

The Apotheosis was the culminating achievement of Brumidi's American career. The design had architect Thomas U. Walter's approval in 1862, but it is unlikely that the use of Renaissance iconography would have been uncontested ten years earlier. Ironically, the Civil War gave the artist the freedom to express his vision of the United States in the classical language of civic nationalism. As Russell Weigley, the biographer of Montgomery C. Meigs, recalled:

> The proposition that the art of the United States Capitol ought to be American art commanded widespread agreement from the American public, government, and press. What constituted an American art was not so clear.[50]

[1] "Nationality in Art," *Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, 1 (Mar. 1857), pp. 75–76.

[2] Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, pp. 8–9.

[3] Pamela Scott, "Power, Civic Virtue, Liberty, and the Constitution: Early American Symbols and the United States Capitol," in Donald R. Kennon (ed.), *A Republic for the Ages: The United States Capitol and the Political Culture of the Early Republic*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1999, pp. 402–447, here pp. 404–406.

[4] Scott, *op.cit*, p. 405 fig. 1; p. 406 fig. 2.

[5] Richard S. Patterson and Richardson Dougall, *The Eagle and the Shield: A History of the Great Seal*, University Press of the Pacific, Honolulu, 2005.

[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*,Verso, London/New York, 2006, p. 6.

[7] Barbara Borngässer, "Neoclassical Architecture in the United States," in Rolf Toman (ed.), *Neoclassicism and Romanticism: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, Drawings, 1750–1848*, Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft, Cologne, 2000, pp, 56–61, here p. 56.

[8] Edward Stevens, Jr., "The Anatomy of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century United States," in Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff (eds.), *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, Plenum Press, New York, 1897, pp. 99–122, here p. 101.

[9] Winterer, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[10] Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015, p. 2.

[11] Vivien Green Fryd, *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol 1815–1860*, Ohio University Press, Athens, 2001, pp. 37–41.

[12] Gordon S. Wood, "Prologue: The Legacy of Rome in the American Revolution," in Peter S. Onuf and Nicholas P. Cole (eds.), *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2011, p. 20. Wood believes that the practice of slavery in the Roman Republic served to justify the practice in the United States. Citizenship was not granted to all Native Americans born in the United States until 1924.

[13] John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2011, p. 10.

[14] Lillian B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism: The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States 1790–1860*,University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966, p. 54.

[15] Fryd, *op. cit.*, pp. 42–57.

[16] Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

[17] Kata Phusin (pseudonym of John Ruskin), "The Poetry of Architecture; or the Architecture of the nations of Europe, considered in its association with natural scenery and national character," *Loudon's Architecture Magazine* (1837) was reprinted in *The Crayon*, vol. 1, no. 6 (7 Feb. 1855), p. 83, and vol. 1, no. 7 (14 Feb. 1855), pp. 98–100.

[18] Andrew Jackson Downing, "A Few Words on Our Progress in Building," *Horticulturist*, 6 (1 June 1851), pp. 251–253, here p. 251.

[19] Alberta Campitelli and Barbara Steindl, "Constantino Brumidi da Roma a Washington: Vicende e opera di artista romano," *Ricerche di storia dell'arte: Pittori fra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione*, 46 (1992), pp. 49–52, here p. 49; Pellegrino Nazzaro, "The Italian Years," in Barbara A. Wolanin (ed.), *Constantino Brumidi, Artist of the Capitol*, Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 1998, pp. 15–23, here p. 15.

[20] Palazzo Torlonia was demolished in 1900.

[21] Brumidi's commissions for the Torlonia are extensively documented in Campitelli and Steindl, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–57.

[22] For Brumidi's Roman period, see Nazzaro, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–23.

[23] Brutus (Samuel F.B. Morse), *Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States*,Leavitt, Lord & Co., New York, 1835, p. 12; Samuel F.B. Morse, *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States: Through Foreign Immigration: and the present state of the naturalization laws*, John F. Trow, New York, 1854.

[24] Humphrey J. Desmond, *The Know-Nothing Party: A Sketch*, New Century Press, Washington, 1905, p. 78.

[25] Katie Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America: Religious Conflict in the Nineteenth Century*, Routledge, New York, 2013, pp. 83–95.

[26] Barbara Wolanin, *Constantino Brumidi: Artist of the Capitol*, Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 1998, p. 89; *Documentary History of the Construction and Development of the United States Capitol Building and Grounds*, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1904, p. 715.

[27] Meigs to John Durand, editor of *The Crayon*, 11 October 1856, in Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

[28] Luigi Garzi (1638–1721), *Cincinnatus at the Plough*; Sebastiano Ricci (1659–1734), *Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus Called from the Plow to the Dictatorship*; Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770), *Dictatorship Offered to Cincinnatus*; Giorgio Berti (1794–1863), *Cincinnatus Receiving the Roman Senate*; Juan Antonio Ribera (1779–1860), *Cincinnatus Abandons the Plow*.

[29] Wolanin, *op. cit.*, p. 59 figs. 5–13.

[30] Wolanin, *op. cit.*, p. 58. Brumidi included Cyrus McCormick's labor-saving device in the Agricultural group of his *Apotheosis of George Washington* in the Capitol rotunda.

[31] Wolanin, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

[32] "The Capitol-Extension," *Courier and Enquirer*, 18 Aug. 1856, reprinted in *The Crayon*,3 (October 1856), p. 311.

[33] Architect Thomas U. Walter provided funding for eighty-nine rooms; see Wolanin, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[34] Wolanin, *op. cit.*, *ibidem*.

[35] Reprinted in *The Crayon*, 3, no. 12 (Dec. 1856), p. 377.

[36] Wolanin, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

[37] Wendy Wolff (ed.), *Capitol Builder: The Shorthand Journals of Montgomery C. Meigs 1853–1859, 1861*, Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 2000, p. 549 n130.

[38] Reprinted in *The Crayon*, 5, no. 10 (October 1858), p. 296.

[39] "Art-Desecration of the Capitol," *Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, 2, no. 2 (1858), pp. 134–136, here p. 136; see Wolanin, *op. cit.*, pp. 221–223 for Brumidi's assistants.

[40] Wolanin, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

[41] Wolanin, *op. cit.*, *ibidem*.

[42] Sidney Kapan and Emma Nogrady, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*, 2nd ed., University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1989, pp. 35–43.

[43] Wolanin, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

[44] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 3, sec. xxxix, in E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 9, George Allen, London, 1904, p. 162.

[45] Fryd, *op. cit.*, p. 110; Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–84.

[46] "Art Desecration of Capitol," *op. cit.*, pp. 134–135.

[47] "Henry K. Brown, James R. Lambdin, and John F. Kensett, "Report of the United States Art Commission, February 22, 1860," in Sarah Burns and John Davis (eds.), *American Art to 1900: A Documentary History*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 2009, pp. 374–376, here p. 374.

[48] Brown, et al., *op. cit.*, *ibidem*.

[49] "Francis V. O'Connor, "Symbolism in the Rotunda," in Wolanin, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–169.

[50] Quoted in Wolanin, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

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