



This image depicts *The Apotheosis of Washington* - a very large fresco on the ceiling of the [U.S. Capitol Rotunda](#) - which [Constantino Brumidi](#) created in 1865.

The work plays a key role in *The Lost Symbol*, a novel by Dan Brown.

The [Architect of the Capitol](#) provides more information about this famous fresco:

The Apotheosis of Washington in the eye of the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol was painted in the true fresco technique by Constantino Brumidi in 1865. Brumidi (1805-1880) was born and trained in Rome and had painted in the Vatican and Roman palaces before emigrating to the United States in 1852.

A master of creating the illusion of three-dimensional forms and figures on flat walls, Brumidi painted frescoes and murals throughout the Capitol from 1855 until his death. The canopy fresco, his most ambitious work at the Capitol, was painted in eleven months at the end of the Civil War, soon after the new dome was completed, for \$40,000.

Suspended 180 feet above the Rotunda floor, it covers an area of 4,664 square feet. The figures, up to 15 feet tall, were painted to be intelligible from close up as well as from 180 feet below. Some of the groups and figures were inspired by classical and Renaissance images, especially by those of the Italian master Raphael.

In addition to a description of the work, the Architect of the Capitol provides publicly available photos of the [inner dome and canopy](#), the canopy fresco and close-ups of the individual groupings:

In the central group of the fresco, Brumidi depicted George Washington rising to the heavens in glory, flanked by female figures representing Liberty and Victory/Fame. A rainbow arches at his feet, and thirteen maidens symbolizing the original states flank the three central figures. (The word "apotheosis" in the title means literally the raising of a person to the rank of a god, or the glorification of a person as an ideal; George Washington was honored as a national icon in the nineteenth century.)

Six groups of figures line the perimeter of the canopy; the following list begins below the central group and proceeds clockwise:

- [War](#), with Armed Freedom and the eagle defeating Tyranny and Kingly Power;
- [Science](#), with Minerva [the Roman goddess known as Athena to the Greeks] teaching Benjamin Franklin, Robert Fulton, and Samuel F.B. Morse;
- [Marine](#), with Neptune [the Roman god known as Poseidon to the Greeks] holding his trident and Venus [Aphrodite to the Greeks] holding the transatlantic cable, which was being laid at the time the fresco was painted;
- [Commerce](#), with Mercury [Hermes to the Greeks] handing a bag of money to Robert Morris, financier of the American Revolution;

- [Mechanics](#), with Vulcan [Hephaestus to the Greeks] at the anvil and forge, producing a cannon and a steam engine;
- [Agriculture](#), with Ceres [Demeter to the Greeks] seated on the McCormick Reaper, accompanied by America in a red liberty cap and Flora picking flowers.

The Capitol's cast-iron dome was designed in 1854 by [Thomas U. Walter](#), the fourth Architect of the Capitol, who had also designed the building's [north and south extensions](#).

Work on the dome began in 1856; in 1859 Walter redesigned the structure to consist of an inner and outer dome. A canopy suspended between them would be visible through an oculus, or eye, at the top of the inner dome, and in 1862 Walter asked Brumidi to furnish a design for "a picture 65 feet in diameter, painted in fresco, on the concave canopy over the eye of the New Dome of the U.S. Capitol."

It is possible that Brumidi added a watercolor image of his final canopy design over a tentative sketch on Walter's 1859 drawing at this time. (A photograph of the entire drawing and a detail of the canopy area are available.)

The fresco underwent a thorough cleaning and restoration in 1987-1988. Although fresco is a very durable medium, grime had accumulated on the surface of Brumidi's Apotheosis for over a century. In particular, the joints between the giornate, the sections of plaster, had darkened, creating disfiguring lines in the composition.

Today, with the fresco completely cleaned and treated, the unified effect and soaring illusion of space intended by the artist can once again be seen.

Click on the image for a greatly expanded view.

Credits:

Images and [descriptions online](#), courtesy Architect of the Capitol.

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