



U.S. CAPITOL VISITOR CENTER

# TEACHER LESSON PLAN

GRADE LEVEL: 6 – 8

## THE APOTHEOSIS OF WASHINGTON *by* CONSTANTINO BRUMIDI

### Introduction

On the ceiling of the U.S. Capitol Rotunda is a fresco (painting on freshly laid plaster), the “Apotheosis of Washington.” The artist Constantino Brumidi created the work in 1865, at the end of the Civil War. The fresco depicts President George Washington ascending to the heavens, surrounded by female figures representing Liberty/Authority, Victory/Fame and the original 13 colonies. Around the edges of the fresco are six groups of figures representing War, Science, Marine, Commerce, Mechanics and Agriculture.

Brumidi immigrated to the United States from Italy in 1852. By the time he began working on the “Apotheosis,” he had gained significant experience painting and restoring original frescoes in the Vatican and in private homes. With his impressive background, he created the distinctive work of art at the center of the Capitol.

In this lesson plan, students will discuss both guided and independent explorations of images of the “Apotheosis,” students discuss and develop interpretive theories related to composition and symbols referenced in the artwork. After this analysis, students further reflect by making their own original artwork.





## Estimated Time

One or two class sessions

## National Learning Standards

### U.S. History:

NSS-USH.5-12.4 Expansion and Reform (1801 – 1861)

NSS-USH.5-12.5 Civil War and Reconstruction (1850 – 1877)

### Visual Arts:

NA-VA.5-8.1 Understanding and Applying Media, Techniques, and Processes

NA-VA.5-8.3 Choosing and Evaluating a Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas

NA-VA.5-8.4 Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures

## Learning Skills

Group discussion, analysis of primary source material (artwork), vocabulary enrichment, visual expression, and composition

## Essential Questions

1. What symbols and stories did Constantino Brumidi use in the fresco?
2. What imagery would you use if you were designing this painting today?
3. How were the figures and symbols interpreted in 1865 when Brumidi finished the painting?  
How do you think viewers interpret them today?

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## Documents and Worksheets

### Primary Source Material

- High-quality images of the “Apotheosis of Washington,” including artwork details.  
Image reproduced in PDF or by visiting:  
<https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/capitol-story/apotheosis/apotheosis>

### Secondary Source Material

- Talking Points for Teacher-Led Discussion
- Information about Imagery in the Fresco
- Worksheet for Student Artwork Analysis
- Annotated Online Resources



## Suggested Activities

- As a class, take a first look at the “Apotheosis.” Allow students to look quietly for at least one minute without asking questions. Then, have students share their overall impressions. You may choose to prompt discussion with the following questions:
  - What is happening in the image?
  - What do you see and notice?
  - Do you think there is a message or story being told here? If so, what and why?

Acknowledge student comments and try to link and frame their observations together. Allow time for students to look carefully.

- List and review student observations, sharing general background information (reference Talking Points for Teacher-Led Discussion). Consider that historical eras and cultural perspectives have their own common vocabulary of symbols. For example, people living in the mid-19th century might be familiar with the Roman gods and goddesses and the concepts they represented. Consider what symbols we might use today to represent science, commerce or agriculture.
- In small groups or individually, assign or have students choose one of the six groups outlining the perimeter of the artwork. Have them look closely at their subject and respond in writing using the provided worksheet. After completing the worksheet, ask students to share their reflections.
- Students can create artwork (perhaps collage, sketch, graphic art) inspired by their investigation of the “Apotheosis.” What symbols will they use today to highlight the history of the United States? What symbols of science and technology will they include? Which individuals will be highlighted? Have students share their artwork and explain the symbols and compositions used in their design.

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## Extended Activity

- Discuss this lesson within the context of historical events from 1776 to the 1860s. Consult textbooks and online resources for timelines of relevant events and consider the following questions:
  - Why do you think George Washington is portrayed in this way?
  - What message might Brumidi have hoped to convey?
  - What was happening in the 1860s that may have influenced his designs?



## Talking Points for Teacher-Led Discussion

### What does apotheosis mean?

The term apotheosis means the raising of a person to the rank of a god, or the glorification of a person or an ideal.

### How is George Washington depicted in the “Apotheosis of Washington?”

George Washington is depicted in a seated position, rising to the heavens with a rainbow at his feet. Brumidi painted Washington in his military uniform. The lavender robe draped across his lap is similar to the designs seen in classical statues of ancient Greece and Rome. Washington is shown as a universally admired figure, representing the ideal of civic virtue, considered by the founding fathers to be critical to the success of the nation.

### Who are the figures next to him?

The two female figures, Liberty/Authority and Victory/Fame are symbolic figures. Authority carries a “fasces” or bundle of rods, which was a symbol of power and authority in the Roman Empire. Liberty wears a red cap. Fame sounds a trumpet, while Victory is adorned with classical wings.



### Who are the 13 female figures?

The 13 female figures, each with a star, represent the original colonies. Those near Liberty/Authority have cotton ball wreaths, suggesting the Southern states. They hold a banner with the words “E Pluribus Unum,” which means “Out of Many, One.” This motto, proposed by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson in 1776, reflects the intention to create a single unified nation from a collection of former colonies.

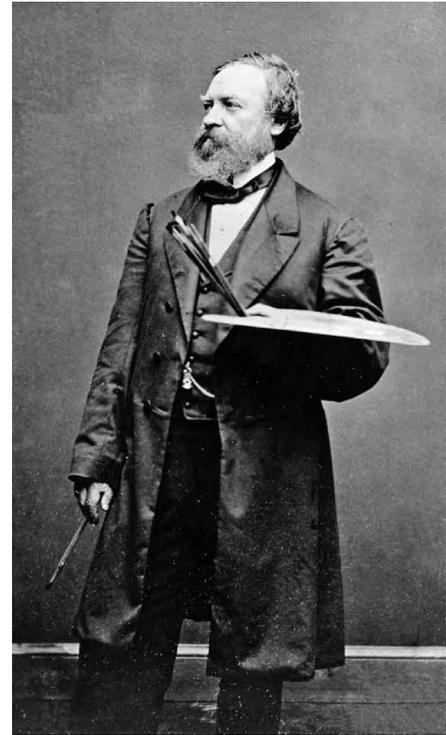
### Who was Constantino Brumidi?

Born and trained in Italy, Constantino Brumidi immigrated to the United States in 1852 at the age of 47. By the time he began working in the United States, he had already gained a tremendous amount of experience painting frescoes and other murals in the Vatican, as well as in private homes.

In the “Apotheosis,” Brumidi used figures and symbols that referenced classical gods and goddesses, images that were common in the 19th century but not to us today. He created a unique composition featuring classical gods and goddesses, figures from American history, and 19th century inventions.

**What were some of Brumidi's techniques?**

Brumidi used the classical technique of fresco, painting on freshly laid plaster. He was a master at creating the illusion of three-dimensional images on flat surfaces, a technique started in the classical era. The figures in the Apotheosis were seen from different perspectives – as much as 180 feet away by viewers on the Rotunda floor and as close as the balcony surrounding the fresco.

**Annotated Online Resources**

<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/apotheosis-washington>

An overview of information related to the “Apotheosis of Washington.” You can also download an image of the painting from this website.

<https://kids-clerk.house.gov/middle-school/lesson.html?intID=40>

This website has information about the “Apotheosis,” the groups around the perimeter of the main scene, and a brief biography of Brumidi.

<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/constantino-brumidi>

This website includes a brief biography of Brumidi, details related to the painting and links to other art by Brumidi in the Capitol.

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## Scene Details

### War

The armored allegorical figure in this scene represents Freedom. Her raised sword, as well as her cape, helmet, and shield are reminiscent of those on the Statue of Freedom, atop the Capitol Dome. She is pictured trampling Tyranny and Kingly Power. Assisting her is a fierce eagle carrying arrows and a thunderbolt.



### Science

Minerva, goddess of wisdom and the arts of civilization, has a helmet and spear. She points to an electric generator creating power stored in batteries and stands next to a printing press. Inventors Benjamin Franklin, Samuel F.B. Morse and Robert Fulton are pictured with her.



### Commerce

Mercury, god of commerce, with his winged cap and sandals and caduceus (a winged staff entwined with two serpents), hands a bag of gold to Robert Morris, a financier of the Revolutionary War. On the left, men move a box on a dolly; on the right, the anchor and sailors lead into the adjacent scene, "Marine."



### Marine

Holding his trident and crowned with seaweed, Neptune, god of the sea, rides in a shell chariot drawn by sea horses. Venus, goddess of love born from the sea, helps lay the transatlantic telegraph cable. In the background is an iron-clad ship with smokestacks.



### Mechanics

Vulcan, god of the forge, stands at his anvil with his foot on a cannon, near a pile of cannon balls. A steam engine is in the background. Scholars think the man at the forge is Charles Thomas, who was in charge of the ironwork of the Capitol Dome.



### Agriculture

Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, sits on a McCormick reaper with a wreath of wheat and a cornucopia (a goat's horn... prosperity). The allegorical figure America wears a liberty cap and holds the reins of the horses. The goddess Flora gathers flowers in the foreground.



*Images courtesy the Architect of the Capitol.*



## Student Artwork Analysis

Fresco scene: \_\_\_\_\_

When looking at the fresco, what is the first thing you notice? Why?

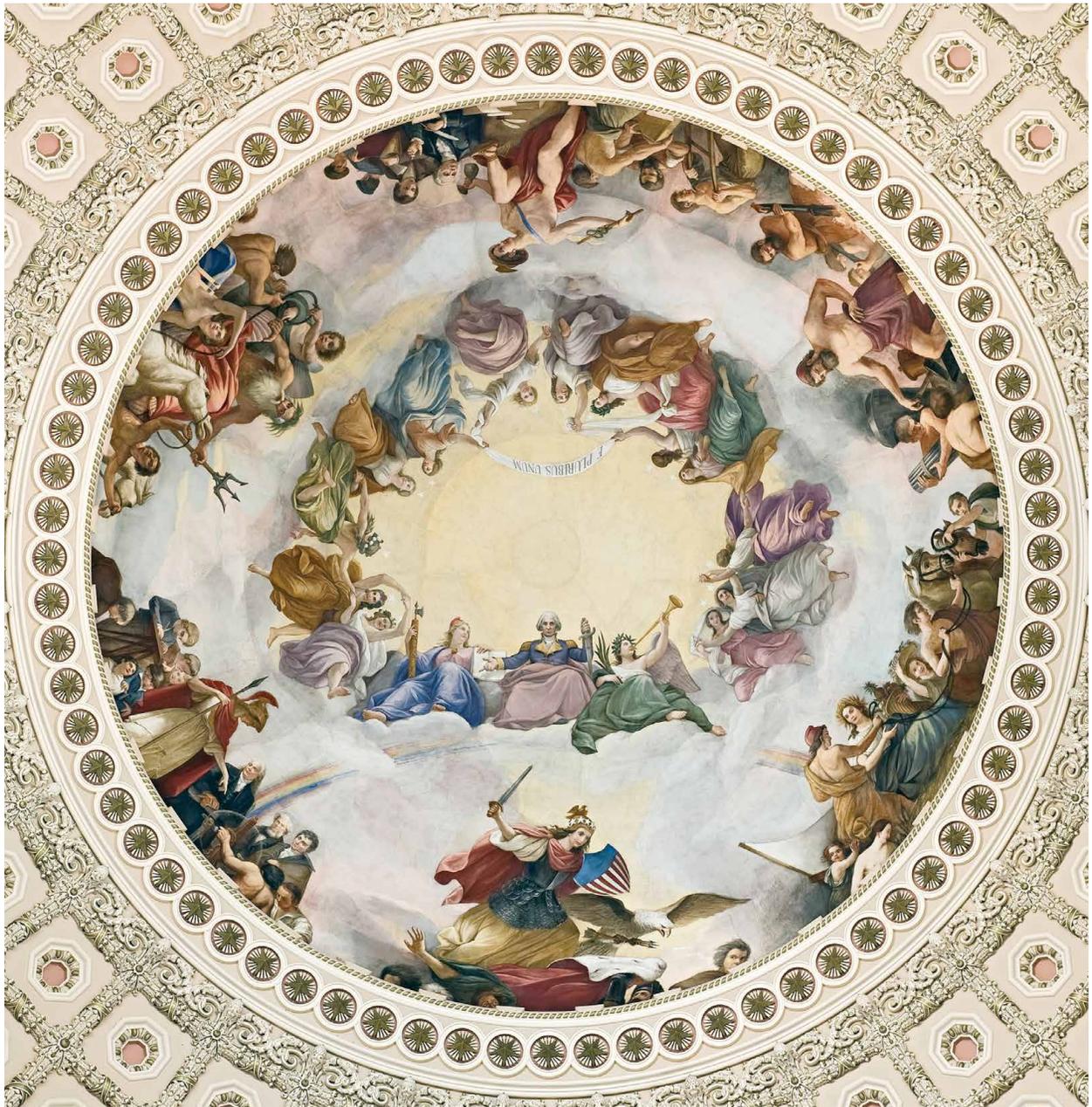
What is the theme represented in your section of the artwork? How can you tell?

Identify the figures in your scene. If needed, refer to the information sheet.

What might be the significance of grouping these figures?

What is the story or message being told here?

What stories or messages are represented in this section of the artwork? What do they say about the way America wanted to present itself to the world in the 1850s?



## Apotheosis of Washington



**Apotheosis of Washington — George Washington Rising to the Heavens detail**



**Apotheosis of Washington —  
War detail**



**Apotheosis of Washington —  
Science detail**



Apotheosis of Washington —  
**Marine detail**



Apotheosis of Washington —  
**Commerce detail**



Apotheosis of Washington —  
**Mechanics detail**



Apotheosis of Washington —  
**Agriculture detail**