
CHAPTER XIX

DECORATION

THE principle or system inaugurated by the early Congresses of acquiring statuary and paintings of historic interest as decorations for the Capitol has continued to the present day. When the new wings of the Capitol extension approached completion, their decorative treatment was carefully considered by Thomas U. Walter, the Architect, and M. C. Meigs, the Superintendent.¹ The group ordered from Horatio Greenough before the wings were begun was not placed in position until the extension was well advanced. The determination at this period in our history appears to have been to obtain the work from the most noted sculptors of the country. The selection fell upon Thomas Crawford, of New York, a student of Thorwaldsen who had made a reputation by his work in Italy; Randolph Rogers, of New York, a student of Bartolini, of Italy; and, later, upon Hiram Powers, of Vermont, who had established his reputation while residing in Florence. With paintings framed or paneled the same principle was maintained, William Henry Powell, of New York, and James Walker being selected. For the purpose of fresco painting it was apparently thought that no American could be secured, and Constantino Brumidi was employed from 1855 until the date of his death in 1880. Not very long after the extension of the Capitol was in readiness for decoration, many Congressmen who had little confidence in Captain Meigs's artistic capacity moved to appoint a commission of artists to select and supervise the character and

¹ Brown assumed that Meigs and Walter together made decisions concerning the art and sculpture for the Capitol. However, Meigs made most of the decisions. See Russell Weigley, "Captain Meigs and the Artists of the Capitol: Federal Patronage of Art in the 1850's," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society of Washington, D.C.* (1971): 285–305.

installation of paintings and statuary. This movement resulted in the acts of Congress of June 12, 1858, and March 3, 1859, which authorized the President to appoint an art commission.²

The act provided that no more of the appropriations should be expended in embellishing any part of the Capitol with sculpture or paintings, unless the design for the same had undergone the examination of a Commission of distinguished artists, not to exceed three in number, to be selected by the President, and that the designs which the said Commission accepted should also receive the subsequent approval of the Joint Committee on the Library of Congress; but this provision was not to be construed to apply to the execution of designs heretofore made and accepted from Crawford and Rogers. May 15, 1859, President Buchanan appointed Henry K. Brown, sculptor, and James R. Lambdin and John F. Kensett, painters.

This Commission organized June 1, 1859, and submitted their only report February 22, 1860.³ The report is interesting and valuable, being presented by the only Art Commission ever appointed by the

² "An Act Making Appropriations for Sundry Civil Expenses of the Government for the Year Ending the 30th of June, 1859," in *Statutes at Large and Treaties of the United States of America*, vol. 11, 323; and "Act Authorizing the President to Appoint an Art Commission to Select and Supervise the Character and Installation of Paintings and Statuary," in *United States Statutes at Large*, vol. 11, 428.

³ "Report of the United States Art Commission," in *Art Commission: Letter of the Secretary of War, Communicating in Compliance with a Resolution of the House, the Report of the Art Commission*, H. ex. doc. 43 (36–1), Serial 1048. The recommendations of this commission were ignored. Brown nevertheless appreciated the report and promoted it as a historical precedent for the appointment of a federal fine arts commission.

Government. They recommended the employment of American artists and the selection of subjects from American history for decorative purposes, and criticised the work of Brumidi in painting rooms in the style of the loggias of Raphael, the baths of Titus and Pompeii, as well as his foreign treatment of American subjects. The detailed recommendations of this Commission are interesting, although little intelligent consideration has been shown to their report. First they recommended that the frieze in the Rotunda, where T. U. Walter suggested bas-relief, should depict civil and religious Freedom. Below the frieze they suggested subjects illustrating colonial and Revolutionary history, the same to continue in the halls leading from the Rotunda to the Senate and to the House of Representatives. The Commission thought the Halls of Congress the proper place for decorations that would illustrate the legislative history of the States and the Nation. Strange as it may seem, no statue or painting of Madison, who took such a prominent and useful part in the making of the Constitution of the United States, has been placed in the Capitol.⁴ The Art Commission noticed this failure to honor one who had done so much in the formation of the basis of the Government, and therefore recommended that a prominent place be given to Madison in the decoration of the House of Representatives. It was the opinion of the Commission "that far greater sobriety should be given to these Halls in their general effect, so as to render them less distracting to the eye. Few are aware how disturbing to thought the display of gaudy, inharmonious colors can be made. This very quality renders such combination of colors unsuited to halls of deliberation, where calm thought and unimpassioned reason are supposed to reside." It was not thought

⁴ There is still no statue of Madison in the Capitol. A painting depicting Madison was placed near the House Chamber in 2003. The James Madison Memorial Building of the Library of Congress (1978) was named in his honor, and a statue is located in a memorial hall off the lobby.

desirable to paint permanent decorations on the grand stairway. It was considered a mistake to employ Horace Vernet, with whom the Committee on the Library were in communication, to paint one of these panels. "No matter how valuable a piece of his work might be in a gallery, he would not have the proper feeling to produce an American historical painting." They believed that the Supreme Court room would be most appropriately decorated with subjects relating to the judicial history of the country. The lobbies of the Senate and House of Representatives were thought the proper places for portraying incidents in pioneer life and scenes illustrating the manners and customs of different sections of the country. The committee rooms should be decorated according to the purposes to which they were applied. For the pediment of the south wing the Commission recommended alto-rilievo instead of detached figures, such as were used in the pediment of the north wing, figures in high relief being more appropriate for architectural treatment than detached pieces of sculpture.

The opinion of the Art Commission as to the effectiveness or good results obtained from competition is of interest and of sufficient value to be heeded to-day. They say: "The well-known repugnance of artists of the first rank, who have achieved a national reputation, to compete with each other would render this method a doubtful policy to pursue with them. It is therefore deemed but respectful and proper to award to such artists commissions for works for which their talents and requirements have fitted them. The commissioners are sustained in their position by the experience and practice of all nations in similar cases."

This interesting report ends with the following extract from a memorial of artists to Congress in 1858: "The advancement of art in the United States may be most surely and completely attained by the establishment of an art commission, composed of those designated by the united voice of American artists as competent to the office, who shall be accepted as the exponents of the authority and influence of American

art; who shall be the channels for the distribution of all appropriations to be made by Congress for art purposes, and who shall secure to artists an intelligent and unbiased adjudication upon the designs they may present for the embellishment of the national buildings.”

The lack of intelligent and continuous supervision in the selection, installation, harmony of color with surroundings, scale in relation to the building and with each other of the decorations is immediately felt in passing through the Capitol. The few artistic results are marred or ruined by their surroundings or location; and, strange to say, this lack of art feeling has been growing more and more manifest as the years pass.⁵

In early years, when we had few artists of capacity, those who were most famous were selected. Now, when we have such sculptors and

painters as St. Gaudens, French, MacMonnies, La Farge, Abbey, and Sargent, who are recognized as great in all parts of the world, they are ignored in the decorations of our greatest building, and the Capitol is being filled with decorations, paintings, and sculpture by men and women comparatively unknown. And, added to the unhappy selection, there is no attention paid to the scale of the building, the scale of the various objects, the harmony of color, or the treatment in their installation. It might be thought that the business instinct, if not the artistic sense, of our people would lead their representatives in Congress to delegate such questions to those of artistic training. It is to be hoped that the positive deterioration shown by the results in the Capitol may lead to an awakening of intelligent interest in this matter and more careful forethought.

⁵ Brown was a major critic of government policy toward the fine arts and believed that many paintings in the Capitol and White House “would not be allowed hanging space in a third class art gallery.” See Glenn Brown, “Art and the Federal Government,” *Appleton’s Magazine* 7 (February 1906): 243. Brown interpreted the formation of the Capitol art commission in 1860 as a major precedent for legislation promoted by the Public Art League in 1897 that called for a board of experts to administer the government’s selection of works

of art and architecture. See Glenn Brown, *Memories, 1860–1930: A Winning Crusade to Revive George Washington’s Vision of a Capital City* (Washington: W. F. Roberts, 1931), 357–365. Brown exaggerated the importance of the Capitol art commission and its report, but he did recognize and publicize the emergence of a curatorial responsibility for the Office of the Architect of the Capitol. In 1909 Charles E. Fairman was employed, and he became the first professional art curator for the Capitol.