



Smithsonian American Art Museum

## **Rethinking Vision in the American Renaissance Murals of Edwin Howland Blashfield**

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Edwin Howland Blashfield (1848–1936) was the premier muralist of his generation, painting murals for thirty majestic buildings across the United States, most notably the dome mural in the Reading Room at the Library of Congress. Thousands of people see his twenty-two surviving murals daily, as focal points in important public spaces, but he has received very limited scholarly attention. My dissertation treats Blashfield as a case study in how American Renaissance muralists conceptualized vision and viewers. He and his contemporaries were keenly aware that mural painting requires sophisticated coordination with architectural space. Close examination of Blashfield's murals, in conjunction with his writings and contemporary criticism, reveals increasingly subtle consideration of viewers' relationships to the illusionistic space of murals, conditioned by specific architectural contexts. The notion that he may have envisioned a corporeal viewer in a complex architectural environment is made more persuasive by theoretical scholarship on late-nineteenth-century visuality, which addresses the subjectivity and variability of vision. Informed by such scholarship, archival research and study of his murals, I contend that Blashfield adjusted his mural practices, both to harmonize murals with their architectural settings, and in recognition that viewers experience murals dynamically and variably, as elements within the built environment.

Guided by the practical problems of mural painting and the complexities of vision, four dissertation chapters will focus on murals designed for particular sets of viewing circumstances. They include murals for domes, for pendentives, for spaces of circulation, and for legislative chambers and courtrooms, where one's role in the proceedings dictates viewing position. For each viewing circumstance, I will focus on two murals that present contrasting solutions to problems of composition, illusionistic space, and relation to viewers within an architectural setting. To contextualize Blashfield's murals, I am investigating both historic European precedents and how his contemporaries handled murals for comparable architectural spaces. An introductory chapter on Blashfield's early career emphasizes how his artistic background, as an academic figure painter, illustrator, and student of Léon Bonnat, laid the groundwork for his mural practice.