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A Venetian Doge in a Yankee Court: Benjamin-Constant's Murals of Venice and Byzantium in the Ames-Webster House, Boston

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Abstract:

This article offers iconographical and historical analysis of a cycle of domestic mural paintings by French artist Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant for the house of Frederick L. Ames in Boston, Massachusetts. Created in 1889–90, the murals depict historical figures from Late Antique Byzantium, including Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora, and noblemen, noblewomen, and Ottoman visitors from Renaissance Venice. This essay argues that these murals are unusual for being in a private home and demonstrates how they harmonized with the American architectural design by John H. Sturgis and the stained-glass windows by John LaFarge.

A Venetian Doge in a Yankee Court: Benjamin-Constant's Murals of Venice and Byzantium in the Ames-Webster House, Boston

by Christopher Carlsmith

Introduction

Among the dozens of elegant brownstones in Boston's Back Bay, the Ames-Webster house at 306 Dartmouth Street stands out both for its stately exterior and rich interior, notable for a cycle of nineteenth-century mural paintings that depict historical figures from Renaissance Venice and Late Antique Byzantium (fig. 1). Completed in 1889–90 by the French artist Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant (1845–1902) for owner Frederick L. Ames (1835–93), two horizontal murals high on the wall of the central hall show a procession of Venetian noblemen and noblewomen, attired in Renaissance dress and arrayed in front of Renaissance buildings. Immediately above this Venetian cycle are four large “portraits” of historical figures from sixth-century Constantinople who gaze down toward the viewer. Surmounted by a stained-glass skylight by American John LaFarge (1835–1910), the murals—like the house itself—remain in situ and largely unchanged (fig. 2). The murals suffer from decades of grime and dust, and some minor stains or scuffs are evident; nevertheless, the images remain bright and easily visible from the stairway and the loggias.^[1]



Fig. 1, Exterior of Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts, in 2013. Courtesy of Back Bay Houses, <http://backbayhouses.org/306-dartmouth/>. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *The Justinian Cycle* and *The Venetian Cycle*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas; John LaFarge, *Guercino Aurora*, 1882, stained glass skylight. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[larger image\]](#)

With the exception of an unpublished manuscript by the late Margaret Henderson Floyd in 1975, and two brief articles published in 2015, the murals have received no scholarly attention, and they have never been studied systematically.^[2] Their obscurity is due in part to the fact that the house was for many years a private residence, owned by Frederick L. Ames and his family from 1882 to 1923, and by the Edwin S. Webster family from 1923 to 1971.^[3] The murals have also been understudied because the popularity of Benjamin-Constant declined substantially in the twentieth century, owing to his intransigence toward modernism, and the rise of competing styles.^[4] Recently, however, a substantial restoration of the house has begun, while Benjamin Constant has received renewed attention in a major international exhibition, *Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism* (2014–15).^[5] A previously unpublished letter from Benjamin-Constant to his patron, described by the artist as “a little explanatory note about your decorations,” offers insight about the style, iconography, and inspiration of the murals.^[6] Thus the time seems right for a reevaluation of the murals.

The Ames murals are significant for several reasons. Together with the wall paintings of John LaFarge at Boston’s Trinity Church (1876–77) and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes at the Boston Public Library (1895–96), they are among the earliest examples of mural painting in Boston. (It is no accident that all three cycles are located in and around Copley Square, because at the end of the nineteenth century it was the cultural heart of Boston.) But while the Lafarge and Puvis cycles are in a church and a public building, respectively, the Ames murals are exceptional for being in a private home. They are also the only surviving wall paintings that Benjamin-Constant, well-known for his mural paintings in France, completed in the United States.^[7] Indeed, they are probably the only mural paintings that Benjamin-Constant ever did for a residential setting. Finally, the murals are unique and interesting for their style and iconography, which raises a series of questions. What exactly do they represent and what is their significance in the context of the Ames house?

Focusing on the murals’ iconography, this article argues that the artist was not striving for historical accuracy or even specificity in his rendition of Venetian and Byzantine figures. Rather, he wanted his murals to complement the architectural style and design of the house, as well as to create an atmosphere of sumptuousness and power consistent with his patron’s

position as the wealthiest man in Boston. In the late nineteenth century, artists, architects, and homeowners sought to establish an overall decorative effect within a house to create a mood and set a tone.^[8] The Ames-Webster house is a fine example of a house that employs historic styles—Renaissance and Byzantine—to create a specific ambiance.

This article is based upon examination of correspondence, newspaper articles, auction catalogs, dealer stock books, family genealogies, and other primary sources. Following some introductory comments about the history of the house and the important individuals in this story, the focus turns to an extended analysis of the Byzantine portraits and the Venetian procession.

The Ames-Webster House

The Ames-Webster house is one of the most prominent and elegant mansions in Back Bay.^[9] Located on the northwest corner of Dartmouth Street and Commonwealth Avenue, this freestanding home was initially designed in the Second Empire style in 1871–72 by the firm of Peabody and Stearns for Stephen Van Rensselaer Thayer, on a plot of 4400 square feet purchased from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (fig. 3).^[10] In 1882, Frederick Ames purchased the house and commissioned architect John H. Sturgis (1834–88) to remodel it. Sturgis added a monumental tower, a massive front hall, a two-story glazed conservatory facing Commonwealth Avenue, and a new entrance on Dartmouth Street with a porte cochère (fig. 4). All that remained of the Peabody and Stearns building were the exterior walls and some of the mansard roof. The renovated façade on Dartmouth Street still includes a roundel with the date of 1882 and the Ames family coat-of-arms on the chimney (fig. 5). *American Architect and Building News* described this house as the “most beautiful single example” of Sturgis’s career, and an undated newspaper clipping confirmed, “The best work of Mr. Sturgis, in the opinion of many of his professional brethren, is . . . the interior of the Ames house.”^[11]



Fig. 3, Exterior of Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, from the First Baptist Church tower, Brattle Street, ca. 1875. Photograph. Courtesy of the Print Department, Boston Public Library and Back Bay Houses, <http://backbayhouses.org/306-dartmouth/>. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 4, Exterior of Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts, ca. 1885. Photograph. Courtesy of Historic New England. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 5, Artist unknown, Roundel on façade of Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts, 1882. Author's photograph. [\[larger image\]](#)

The expanded ground floor of the house included a grand hall measuring sixty-three feet long and eighteen feet wide. A monumental staircase rose three stories to the domed stained-glass skylight by LaFarge; wrapped around the four sides of the stairwell was the mural cycle of Benjamin-Constant. Guests at 306 Dartmouth Street drove into the porte cochère, ascended to the second floor in an elevator, and made a formal entrance down a staircase and into the magnificent hall. The murals above, with their processions and portraits of powerful people of a bygone age, made a fitting backdrop for the Ames family who inhabited this house, and for their guests.

The neighborhood of the Ames-Webster house, Boston's Back Bay, was built up in the nineteenth century and rapidly became a fashionable place for wealthy Bostonians to live.^[12] In describing the houses of the Back Bay, Douglas Shand Tucci observed that “by the 1880s such houses were more and more likely to be the abodes of men and women, leaders in thought and action, whose drawing rooms, centers of an elegant and ceremonious life-style, were as consciously ‘artistic’ as the statues on Commonwealth Avenue.”^[13] Such a description

perfectly fits the Ames house and the family that renovated it in the 1880s. The original 1871 deed of sale for 306 Dartmouth included specific language requiring the new owner to enhance the beauty of the neighborhood and preserve its exclusive character: for example, that “any building erected on the premises shall be at least three stories high,” and that the house “shall not be used for a stable, or for any mechanical, mercantile or manufacturing purposes.”^[14] In addition to imposing residences in a variety of styles (medieval, Edwardian, Queen Anne, Second Empire), there were a significant number of major cultural institutions, including Trinity Church and the Boston Public Library, which anchored this new neighborhood. The same architects and artists who worked at 306 Dartmouth Street—Peabody & Stearns, John Sturgis, and John LaFarge—contributed to the houses and public buildings elsewhere in Back Bay. The Hotel Vendome, located across Commonwealth Avenue from the Ames-Webster house, was built just one year earlier and followed a remarkably similar path of construction and decoration.^[15] Frederick Ames’s house at 306 Dartmouth was among the most grandiose of the residences of Back Bay, but it was no exception.

Patron and Artists

Four men played a crucial role in the construction and decoration of the Ames house: owner Frederick Lothrop Ames, architect John Hubbard Sturgis, stained-glass artist John LaFarge, and muralist Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant.^[16]

Frederick Lothrop Ames, a highly successful Boston businessman who was deeply involved in railroads as well as finance, provided the initial impetus for the renovation of the house.^[17] Dubbed “the Hub’s richest man,” he purchased 306 Dartmouth Street in 1882 and hired the other three men during that decade to transform it. Ames’s total estate was valued between \$25 and \$30 million at his unexpected death from apoplexy in September 1893.^[18]

John Hubbard Sturgis was a versatile architect whose works oscillated between imposing Queen Anne-style residences, Early English Gothic religious buildings, and seaside houses for Boston’s elite families.^[19] Among his many residential commissions, Sturgis designed a house for Isabella Stewart Gardner on Beacon Street (before she built her Venetian palace at Fenway Court); he also created Pinebank Mansion for Edward Perkins in Jamaica Pond (1868) and “The Cottage” for H. H. Hunnewell in Wellesley (1871). Beyond his residential commissions, Sturgis designed the original building of the Museum of Fine Arts in Copley Square (1876; closed 1909), and the Church of the Advent on Beacon Hill (1875–88).^[20]

John LaFarge was an American painter, muralist, and writer, whose most famous contribution is his invention of opalescent glass.^[21] In his stained glass windows, LaFarge sought to recreate the beauty of medieval church windows; through layering multiple pieces of glass together with copper foil and cloisonné in order to replace heavy lead lines, he added depth to the combination of colors and reduced the need to paint the glass. The earliest examples of LaFarge’s stained glass windows, dating from the late 1870s, are found in Boston’s Trinity Church; of the pieces he created for Frederick Ames, only the skylight remains in situ.^[22]

Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant was a French painter and author best known for his Orientalist paintings and his portraits of wealthy Europeans and Americans (fig. 6).^[23] Renowned as a colorist and well known in his lifetime on both sides of the Atlantic, he has been mostly forgotten today. He attended art school in Toulouse and the École des Beaux-Arts

in Paris, after which he travelled to Spain and Morocco for about two years. Upon his return to Paris in 1873, Benjamin-Constant began to show a series of Orientalist subjects at the Salon and for nearly two decades he produced works depicting Janissaries, eunuchs, viziers, and half-naked women, sometimes indulging in what one modern scholar has termed “lurid scenes of violence” and a “predilection for melodrama.”^[24]



Fig. 6, Unknown photographer, *Benjamin-Constant in his Paris Studio*, ca. 1890. Photograph. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, digital ID: 3823. “Current copyright status is undetermined,” according to the Archives of American Art website, www.aaa.si.edu. [\[larger image\]](#)

In the late 1880s and 1890s, Benjamin-Constant travelled regularly to North America, including visits to New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Montreal. He was the first prominent French artist to do so, and the press avidly described his sojourns of two or three months each winter.^[25] Benjamin-Constant established a temporary studio in New York, and met with some of the leading families on the Eastern seaboard; this strategy led to a series of commissions in 1888–90, including *panneaux décoratifs* (decorative panels) for the Oliver Ames house at 355 Massachusetts Avenue,^[26] a portrait of Mrs. Oliver Ames (née Anna Coffin Ray),^[27] and the *plafond* (ceiling) in Frederick Ames’s house.^[28]

It was precisely at this point in Benjamin-Constant’s career that he transitioned from large-scale history paintings to portraits. He completed portraits of American tycoons Jay Gould of New York (1889), Anthony Drexel of Philadelphia (1893), and Frederick Ayer of Boston (1898), as well as of Queen Victoria (1899) and Pope Leo XIII (1900).^[29] From 1888 to 1892—contemporaneous with his work on the Ames murals and his early American portraits—Benjamin-Constant also worked on large-scale ceiling decorations in Paris, including those for the academic council room at the Sorbonne (1888) and the Salle des Fêtes at the Hôtel de Ville (1892). An author as well as a painter, Benjamin-Constant wrote a number of articles in English for *Harper’s Magazine*, including an analysis of Victor Hugo as a painter, and a self-promotional piece entitled “My Portraits.”^[30] He died unexpectedly at the age of fifty-seven; obituaries were published in Paris, London, New York, and Boston.^[31]

The Murals

The murals comprise six panels arranged in two tiers below the stained-glass skylight: two rectangular murals representing a procession of aristocrats in Venice, and four additional

murals depicting Byzantine rulers and their courtiers. Each canvas was prepared with a white background on which the artist first drew figures and architectural detail in pencil, and then painted in oil. The murals were likely installed in the late fall of 1890, during Benjamin-Constant's third trip to North America and shortly after he had received payment from Frederick L. Ames. Each of the two Venetian panels is flanked by a sixteen-foot wooden loggia with five arches, separated by fluted Ionic pillars identical to those in the Venetian panels (fig. 7). The north-side loggia is easily reached from the main stairway of the house; the opposite loggia is accessible only through a tiny door hidden inside a closet. It was intended as a semi-obscured stage where musicians could play during a party, allowing the music to waft through the open stairwell down to the entrance hall. At each of the corners of the vault above the staircase are two triangular canvas panels with stylized representations of the patron's initials: FLA (Frederick Lothrop Ames) intertwined with roses and other flowers. Framing each set of patron's initials are a series of abstract geometric designs, again in gold, on top of simulated porphyry. Wooden moldings separate the large Byzantine figures from the corner canvases.



Fig. 7, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *First Counsellor*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[larger image\]](#)

The Venetian panel on the west wall depicts the doge of Venice and his retinue receiving keys from an Ottoman prince and his servant (fig. 8). The Venetian panel on the east wall shows the dogaressa, her ladies-in-waiting, and her children following a senior male Venetian, the “Master of the Palace,” who seems to open the door for an Ottoman ambassador (fig. 9). The two horizontal murals are 157.5 inches long and 54.5 inches high. The west panel bears the artist's signature, “Benj. Constant,” and the date of 1889, while the second panel features just the artist's initials, “B.C.” As discussed below, Benjamin-Constant consciously imitated the style of Paolo Veronese in these two panels, using energetic brushwork and a full panoply of figures.



Fig. 8, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Patrician Woman* [above] and *Venetian Cycle* with Doge [west wall], 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 9, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant *Empress Theodora* [above] and *Venetian Cycle* with Dogaressa [east wall], 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[larger image\]](#)

The four curved panels in the top register show Byzantine rulers with golden haloes seated on golden thrones, set against blue backgrounds filled with flowers.^[32] The gold is applied in little squares of gold leaf calling to mind the *tesserae* used in Byzantine mosaics. The murals on the south and north walls, each measuring 60 x 114 inches, represent the Byzantine Emperor Justinian and what Benjamin-Constant called the “First Counsellor.”^[33] The murals on the east and west walls, each measuring 60 x 105 inches, represent Justinian’s wife (the empress Theodora), and a “Patrician Woman.” The painting of Justinian is signed and dated in red paint at the bottom left corner, “Benj-Constant, 1890.” The style, size, and perspective of these four figures are different from those in the Venetian panels. The Byzantine figures are significantly larger, and they look directly at the viewer rather than at other figures in the mural.

The condition of the murals is generally good; a conservation report of 2013 noted that “the paint and ground layers remain without cracks . . . and the colors are quite vivid despite a thick layer of yellowed grime and dust.”^[34] A brownish dried liquid has splattered onto the procession of women and children, and there are minor undulations in some portions of the canvas, but most of the canvas remains adhered to the underlying plaster wall. It appears that a natural resin varnish was applied to the figures prior to installation, and that the artist reworked details in the faces and robes over the varnish.^[35]

The Byzantine Ruler Figures

On the south wall (toward Commonwealth Avenue) is the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (482–565) seated on a throne, wearing a crown, and holding a parchment scroll with a red wax seal that likely represents a decree pertaining to the *Digest* (fig. 10).^[36] A blue *trabea* is wrapped around most of his body, largely obscuring the gold-colored tunic that he wears underneath. Green emeralds stud his crown and necklace; bejeweled golden strings hang down from his crown to his shoulders. More precious stones, this time red and white, gird the shoulders and the wrists of his tunic. A geometric pattern decorates the part of the *trabea* covering his chest.^[37] Easily the best-remembered ruler of the Byzantine empire, Justinian was famous for his military exploits against the Vandals and the Ostrogoths, as well as for rewriting Roman Law, building the Hagia Sophia, and surviving a catastrophic outbreak of bubonic plague.



Fig. 10, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Emperor Justinian*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[larger image\]](#)

A prior image of the emperor, *Justinian in Council*, had been exhibited by Benjamin-Constant at the Paris Salon in 1886 and was later acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in New York.^[38] In this massive painting, the emperor is also seated on a large gold throne, but he is flanked by six advisors, while a seventh man, seated on the floor in front of him, reads from a scroll. According to fellow artist and author John Murray Templeton’s description in 1891, this “vast canvas filled with some seven large figures arrayed in the full panoply of Roman state . . . was expected to gain for him [i.e., Benjamin-Constant] that honour so dear to every French artist, ‘the grand medal of the Salon’, and for which he had long been steadily painting at least one large picture a year.”^[39] Unfortunately for Benjamin-Constant, the painting did not win a prize.^[40] A letter by Benjamin-Constant, dated 1887, in which he describes it to its new owner, Godfrey Mannheimer, sheds some light on its subject:

In response to your welcome letter, I herewith send you the desired historical explanation. I represented Justinian over a council of legal Savants. You will remember this great emperor of the Romans of the East left a collection of laws, ‘The Institutions and Pandects,’ which have served for nearly all cultivated nations of a later period as a basis of their written laws. I could not present Justinian in a better manner than in the middle of his intimate counsellors and great spirits of that epoch – like Tribonian, Hypathius, Porbus, John of Cappadocia. The Legislators are at his right, the Liturgists at his left side. My painting alludes to a case concerning the rights of the Church, which the emperor intends to see cleared up. He has sent, for this reason, for an hermit living

in a remote desert and prominent on account of his knowledge. The painting presents him [the hermit] reading a letter concerning the case which is written by the own hands of the Apostle Paul. The old parchment with red letters, held by the hermit is a copy of a handwriting of the 9th century, dept [deposited?] now at the National Library of Paris.

[\[41\]](#)

Benjamin-Constant intended the figure at the Ames-Webster mansion to represent similar ideas about Justinian as a “great emperor” and as a founder of the Western legal canon, even if the emperor appears alone rather than in council. As demonstrated in this 1887 letter to Mannheimer, Benjamin-Constant was acquainted with the relevant history of the subject of the painting; his comments about Justinian’s legal achievements, as well as the names of the emperor’s companions, are correct. However, the specific event described in this painting, “a case concerning the rights of the Church, which the emperor intends to see cleared up,” does not correspond to a documented case of which I am aware. Here, as elsewhere, Benjamin-Constant does not aim for full historical accuracy but rather strives to convey a sense of the place and the protagonists. Indeed, in an article published in November 1900, Benjamin-Constant claimed that content was less important than the overall effect of the painting:

“The subject” in Painting is not of great importance. . . . The Crowd gathers before the pictures which depict various kinds of occurrences, before some battle-piece, for instance, of whose correctness it cannot judge, or some dramatic scene of history which may not even represent the facts. But this is of little or no significance.[\[42\]](#)

Benjamin-Constant’s view that the subject of a painting was “not of great importance” is evident also in his comments about the choice of Byzantium and Venice as subjects for the murals in Boston. In his letter to Mrs. Ames, Benjamin-Constant wrote, “As to the ceiling, if we take the arching which frames the glass windows which consequently is in the dark, I have used the gold in mosaic to lighten the vault. This brought me to compose in the Byzantine style. But Byzance and Venice go hand in hand.”[\[43\]](#) The artist’s observation implies that the inclusion of Venice as a subject was almost an afterthought; even the choice of Byzantium as a subject seems to have been driven by a desire to provide, through the use of gold, more light in the vaulted ceiling, rather than by a conscious decision about the theme.

In the same letter, Benjamin-Constant identifies each of the figures. He lauds Justinian as “the greatest emperor” and “the greatest legislator” after Constantine and praises Justinian’s “immense gathering of laws,” distilled from Lycurgus, Solon, the Gracchi, Augustus, Constantine, and Marcus Aurelius, which according to the artist form the basis of all schools of law.[\[44\]](#) Benjamin-Constant recognizes that Justinian was not perfect, and points out the emperor’s weaknesses too, notably his lack of both martial and marital skills. As to the former, Benjamin-Constant says, the emperor was fortunate to have “Bélisaire” (Belisarius) as his military general. Regarding the latter comment about the emperor’s marital skills, Benjamin-Constant makes reference to the empress Theodora, who appears on the east wall of the mural cycle.

Benjamin-Constant represents Theodora (ca. 500–548) swathed in a mixture of dark green, light green, and tawny gold fabric (fig. 11). A thick gold diadem encircles her dark hair, holding a green jewel on the center of her forehead; similar green jewels adorn her earrings, and a large diamond-shaped green pendant hangs around her neck. Her left hand rests on her chest,

either pointing to the pendant or to herself. One of the most colorful figures in Late Antiquity, Theodora was a lower-class courtesan and actress who beguiled Justinian with her feminine charms. She was renowned for her ruthlessness and determination. In his letter to Mrs. Ames, Benjamin-Constant criticized Theodora as a “parvenue [who] made [Justinian] forget her plebeian origin by being at the emperor’s side” and “who . . . in difficult moments, amidst an unruly, agitated, cultivated, and perverted population, knew for a long while how to inspire them with the fear of her power.”^[45] Just as Benjamin-Constant had reimagined the figure of Justinian from his earlier work of 1886, so too did he draw upon a prior image of Theodora. The 1887 *Theodora*, now in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes of Buenos Aires, shows a royal female figure very similar to that in the Ames-Webster house; both are bejeweled and dressed in dark green, sitting on a large marble throne, staring directly at the viewer.^[46]



Fig. 11, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Empress Theodora*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[larger image\]](#)

The other two figures in this Byzantine cycle are dressed in a similar style but lack a specific identity. The male figure on the north wall holds a stylus in his right hand, and a half-furled scroll rests on his lap (fig. 12). Unlike the other three figures, this one has his head cocked to the left and he appears to be looking just past the viewer. He wears a full-length aquamarine tunic with a rich golden collar and, on the hem, below knee level, an embroidered image of Christ flanked by three saints. The embroidery is painted in heavy impasto to suggest its richness.^[47] The red-haired female figure on the west wall is dressed in voluminous folds of burgundy-colored fabric, covering a long-sleeve golden tunic underneath (fig. 13). Hanging from a strand of pearls across the top of her head is a large gold pendant covering her brow, which is flanked by two smaller pieces of gold jewelry hanging above her eyes. A pair of gold earrings dangle nearly to her shoulders, and a single gold ring with a green stone adorns her right index finger. Her left hand clasps her right wrist in a relaxed pose.



Fig. 12, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *First Counsellor*, 1889–80. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 13, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Patrician Woman*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[larger image\]](#)

The male figure might represent Tribonian (500–547), a jurist and *magister officiorum* (master of offices) who supervised the new imperial legal code (*Codex Justinianus*) and revised the textbook for all first-year law students (*Institutes*).^[48] The female figure opposite him could well be the Byzantine noblewoman Antonina (484–565), who was the wife of general Belisarius and a lifelong friend of Empress Theodora.^[49] However, Benjamin-Constant made clear in his correspondence with Mrs. Ames that he did not have specific historical figures in mind for this dyad. Instead, they were intended to serve as a matched pair to complement Justinian and Theodora. Benjamin-Constant wrote, “Opposite [Theodora], the one draped in red is a Patrician woman, one of her attendants of Roman origin. Facing Justinian we find the first Counsellor of the Empire. He is writing under the dictation of his master.”^[50] Each of the four figures stares directly down at the viewer. Once again, Benjamin-Constant’s letter suggests that he was aiming to represent a general sense of Byzantine history with these two latter figures rather than specific persons.

The Venetian Cycle

The two rectangular murals situated below the Byzantine figures depict a procession of Venetian nobles and Ottoman dignitaries. An article published in the *Illustrated American* of November 1892 provides a brief contemporary description:

For the house of Mr. Frederick L. Ames of Boston, the artist painted, in his Paris studio, an important decorative work. This represents Eastern potentates making homage and offering gifts to a Venetian doge, who is accompanied by officers of state and the women of his family. It fills the upper panels to the right and left of the huge staircase wall, or rather hall, which reaches to the top story of the spacious mansion.[\[51\]](#)

This account suggests that the two panels, on the west and east walls, should be read as one continuous image, even if they are separated by the loggias. The doge of Venice, with his distinctive hat (*cornio*), stands at the center of the scene on the west wall, receiving a pair of ornate bronze keys from a dark-skinned, turban-wearing man in a sign of submission (fig. 14). Another dark-complexioned “foreigner,” to the left, holds a jeweled scimitar, presumably a gift for the ruler of Venice. The red flag with the gold lion of San Marco waves triumphantly above the scene, while half a dozen “officers of state” look on, clad in high-necked velvet cloaks and wearing symbols of their office. The first four advisors are clearly senior to the two young men in the corner of the mural. Two of these senior officials wear round caps of red or black cloth while a third is bareheaded and a fourth (partially obscured) appears to wear a red cowl. Similar to the doge, all four men sport a beard and mustache; two of the senior men wear a medallion and chain around their necks. Each of the officials bears a serious expression, and each looks intently at the diplomatic scene in front of them. The two men at the back of the retinue wear similarly elaborate clothing but their unbearded youthful faces mark them as less important. One of the young men holds a parchment scroll but he stares in a different direction, seemingly distracted by something outside the scene. Behind the doge is a white marble building with multiple arches, topped by statues; it resembles Jacopo Sansovino’s buildings on the west side of Piazzetta San Marco, notably the Marciana Library.[\[52\]](#) The implication is that we are standing on the balcony of the Ducal Palace, looking across the Piazzetta.



Fig. 14, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, Detail of *Venetian Cycle* with Doge, 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[larger image\]](#)

The letter from Benjamin-Constant to Mrs. Ames identifies most of the male figures as well as offering a rationale for the encounter depicted in the mural. Nevertheless, the artist’s letter raises as many questions as it answers, for some of the details are contradictory or frustratingly vague. Benjamin-Constant explained the scene to his patron in this way:

A “Doge” (chief of Venice and Genoa) – Dandolo or another, receives from the hands of an Oriental prince, son of a khalif of the Islands of the Archipelago, the keys of some city or island conquered by the fleets of the “Serenissime” Republic. The “Doge” has on a gold cap called a *cornio* and is dressed in a gothic velvet cloak, woven of red and gold. On his right stands an Ambassador of France or England, who came perhaps to borrow money from the Republic, in order to equip armies for some Crusade in the Holy Land,

including the transportation by the Galleys of Venice. . . . On the left of the “Doge” we find a Senator, [a] first Counsellor of the State, followed by other great lords.[53]

The artist’s description of the doge’s hat and clothing was certainly accurate. Benjamin-Constant wrote that this doge was “a Dandolo or another,” referring to one of the traditional noble families of Venice; the Dandolo family contributed four doges to Venice between 1200 and 1350.[54] The reference to “some Crusade in the Holy Land, including the transportation by the Galleys of Venice” was likely a reference to the infamous Fourth Crusade of 1202–4, when Venetian ships carried European soldiers to Zadar on the Adriatic coast and thence on to Constantinople. As doge of Venice from 1194 to 1205, Enrico Dandolo was deeply involved in the events of the Fourth Crusade. These references to a Dandolo doge and the Crusades would indicate that Benjamin-Constant was imagining a scene from the early thirteenth century.

However, there are a number of visual and textual clues that suggest that Benjamin-Constant may have been thinking more of Renaissance than of late medieval Venice. For example, the buildings in the background, if indeed they are those by Jacopo Sansovino and Vincenzo Scamozzi, were completed between 1537 and 1588. Resident ambassadors, such as those referenced by Benjamin-Constant in his letter, were much more common in sixteenth-century Europe than in the late Middle Ages. It was precisely in the sixteenth century that Venice led the way in developing the techniques of modern diplomacy (e.g., diplomatic pouches, secret codes, regular reports, resident ambassadors). The dark-skinned pair paying homage to the doge appear to be from the Ottoman Empire (founded 1299 but at the height of its power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), which regularly battled Venice in the early modern period. The full, salt-and-pepper beard of the doge resembles the portraits of many 16th-17th century doges; prior to 1500 doges were usually clean-shaven, and those after 1650 had very small goatees and distinctive mustaches.[55] The reference to “some city or island conquered by the fleets of the ‘Serenissime’ Republic” could be a reference to the *Stato da Mar*, as Venice’s maritime possessions in the Mediterranean and Aegean were called (although much of this territory had been lost prior to the sixteenth century).[56] The Republic of Venice had several hundred senators and other office-holders akin to “first Counsellor of the State,” and the male patricians did often dress sumptuously as depicted here, with stoles, caps, and cloaks. Perhaps most importantly, Benjamin-Constant declared in his letter that these murals were “composed in the sentiment of the school of Veronese,” thus tying the style of the work firmly to the sixteenth century.

Despite these multiple links to the sixteenth century, one cannot help but notice the deliberate lack of specificity in Benjamin-Constant’s written description of the first Venetian panel. For example, the terms “Oriental prince” and “Islands of the Archipelago” could easily refer to the Ottoman Empire and its dominions in the Mediterranean, but the terms are sufficiently broad that they could refer to other places. Benjamin-Constant writes that the keys offered to the doge are to “some city or island,” and that the ambassador “came perhaps to borrow money” to equip armies for “some Crusade.” The identity of the Ambassador is left open as “France or England,” and the doge as “a Dandolo or another.” The artist’s description of the background also avoids mention of any specific building, noting only that the figures appear “on a ground of architectures borrowed from the best known monuments of Venice.” The nonspecific nature of these descriptions, also evident in the generic titles of “First Counsellor” and “Patrician

Woman” for two of the Byzantine figures, suggest that Benjamin-Constant was seeking a general theme rather than historical accuracy.

The second half of the procession shows five elegantly dressed women and two children following a senior Venetian official, whom Benjamin-Constant identifies as “Master of the Palace,” and another Ottoman described by the artist as a “colored Prince” (fig. 15).^[57] The white-bearded Venetian official, who carries a cane or a staff in his left hand and is holding a chain of office above his chest with his right hand, wears an embroidered red and gold cape with a black stole, similar to the men in the first scene. He leads the group in a procession. Coincidentally, just beyond the outstretched hand of this Venetian official is a hidden passage from an adjacent room to the loggia, intended to provide access for musicians to perform. If the elderly Venetian official and the women were to pass through the adjacent loggia, they would be directly behind the two young men at the end of the doge’s procession. The “colored Prince” grasps the pommel of a sword with his left hand, the scabbard of which goes under his arm and emerges by his left hip. He wears a salmon-colored turban, a row of pearls on his chest, and a green robe with golden designs that is distinctly different from the clothes of the Venetians. He sports a small black beard and mustache, and stares at the head of the Master of the Palace. Two young children come next; one stares resolutely forward while the other swivels to look back at the motherly figure just behind. That lady lays a hand upon the shoulder of one child, and presumably her other hand guides the other child. Of the three young women grouped together, two carry flowers (a bouquet and a single flower), while the last woman—her hair festooned with pearls and her chest supporting a gold medallion on a heavy chain—brandishes what appears to be either a small flag or a fan. The background here is virtually identical, with a row of white marble buildings and a triumphal arch that evokes Jacopo Sansovino’s Loggetta adjacent to the campanile. One minor difference in the second (female) procession is the presence of tiny female and Ottoman figures in the background, perched under small archways and on balconies.



Fig. 15. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, Detail of *Venetian Cycle with Dogaresse*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[larger image\]](#)

Benjamin-Constant describes the second panel much more briefly: “On the panel, opposite, the procession continues and the ‘dogaresse’, followed by three young Patrician women and a mistress of ceremony, advances, leaning on the shoulder of a little girl, hers without doubt? An old Master of the Palace, followed by a colored Prince, walks ahead.”^[58] The *dogaresse* was the wife of the doge. It was an important position in late medieval and early modern Venice, as it represented one of the few opportunities for women to exercise some authority within the state.^[59] In this case, however, the dogaresse lacks any of the identifying markers of her office, such as the ducal *cornio*. Although the phrase “Master of the Palace” (often translated as “majordomo”) was in regular usage in Europe, the phrase “mistress of ceremony” appears to be

an office invented by Benjamin-Constant. The style of the painting—crowded with figures, and completed in a dramatic, colorful style—again evokes Veronese.

By mixing together diverse elements of Venetian pageantry, history, and architecture, this panel, like the other, suggests that Benjamin-Constant sought to evoke Renaissance Venice rather than to recreate a specific historical moment. The rhetorical question that he poses about the identity of the little girl confirms this. His comment to Mrs. Ames that “the subject is not too much complicated, and most easy to remember” also implies that it was not a specific historical event but rather a more general scene.

Although Benjamin-Constant painted dozens of history paintings based upon his experiences in North Africa and across the Mediterranean, he completed only a few works depicting Venice. In addition to a mediocre rendition of a rose-tinted canal, bequeathed to the Sheffield Galleries and Museum in 1938, Benjamin-Constant painted *Venetian Palace Interior with Notables*, featuring sumptuous costumes of Venetian elites and a large well-head.^[60] More interesting for our purposes are those Venetian scenes that include Moorish figures. For example, Benjamin-Constant depicted two Venetian officials and a dark-skinned Muslim standing in front of the Loggetta in Piazzetta San Marco (signed and dated 1891).^[61] An undated painting entitled *In a Gondola* shows a Venetian couple reclining in a red gondola while a pair of anonymous dark-skinned rowers in white turbans bow down before them.^[62] A third painting entitled *Venice: Return of the Envoy* also shows three figures (two male, one female) in Venetian and Ottoman dress, huddled inside a domestic interior.^[63] A final painting, *Venetian Princesses and Their Moorish Guard*, once again combines Venetian and Ottoman subjects in a style akin to the Ames murals.^[64] Thus we know that Benjamin-Constant had some familiarity with Venice and with Venetian topics, and that he was fond of juxtaposing “Venetian” and “Moorish” figures in his compositions. His prior works suggest that Benjamin-Constant may have conceived of the Veneto-Byzantine theme by himself; yet there is also evidence that he was influenced by the residential context and by his colleagues at 306 Dartmouth Street.

Margaret Henderson Floyd has suggested that Benjamin-Constant was commissioned by architect John Sturgis to create a decorative scheme that would complement Sturgis’s plans for remodeling the house. Based upon her study of both Sturgis’s buildings and his papers, she points to the faux-mosaic entryway (similar to that of the ceiling vault where the Byzantine figures reside) and the elaborately carved oak staircase.^[65] She suggests further that the Byzantine figures complement those in Trinity Church, which were completed at about the same time.^[66] As John LaFarge was the principal muralist for the murals in Trinity Church, and the artist of six stained-glass windows at 306 Dartmouth Street, he too may have influenced Benjamin-Constant.^[67]

Benjamin-Constant’s letter to Mrs. Ames confirms that the artist was indeed responding to the interior architecture of the house. In the second paragraph, he wrote, “Your large staircase being of the Renaissance style, nothing could be more appropriate and harmonize better than Venetian subjects of the time of [Paolo] Veronese, and composed in the sentiment of the school of Veronese.”^[68] Benjamin-Constant’s letter indicates that he selected “Venetian subjects” of Veronese’s time—presumably this means that the doge, ambassador, senators, master of the palace, and foreign dignitaries were intended to be from mid-sixteenth century

Venice, even if the artist did not equate them to specific individuals. Thus, it seems clear that Benjamin-Constant chose these Venetian scenes, inspired in part by the pre-existing staircase and perhaps by other elements of Sturgis's 1882 renovation.

It is also important to note that Venice held a particular allure for Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century. They admired its republican roots and long-term independence from foreign powers, as well as its commercial economy, religious toleration, and integration of immigrants.^[69] The Serenissime's literature, music, and artwork were also widely admired; Henry James, James McNeill Whistler, and John Singer Sargent each spent substantial time in Venice. Bostonians also brought pieces of Venice home; Isabella Stewart Gardner's Fenway Court is perhaps the most famous example. She imported entire rooms from Venice, including a "Veronese Room" in 1901, and for more than a decade was a neighbor of Frederick Ames. However, Mrs. Gardner's Venetian palace in Boston was created too late to inspire Benjamin-Constant's wall murals of 1889–90. Also too late is the "Venetian Lobby" of the Boston Public Library, decorated by Joseph Lindon Smith in the mid-1890s; it includes a relief of the Lion of St. Mark over a central door, the names of mainland cities and island outposts of the Venetian Republic, and a fresco that shows Venice exercising dominion over the Adriatic.^[70] A companion room in the Boston Public Library was supposedly inspired by the doge's library;^[71] the neoclassical façade of the Boston Athenaeum bears strong resemblance to buildings around Piazza San Marco. These and other examples suggest that there was a strong appetite in late nineteenth-century Boston for Venetian culture.

More puzzling is the inspiration for the four Byzantine portraits. Neither Frederick Ames nor Benjamin-Constant nor John Sturgis had any direct connection to Byzantine art or culture; nor did Boston possess any particular interest in things Byzantine in the late nineteenth century. Constant's own letter of the 1890s suggested that "Byzance and Venice go hand-in-hand."^[72] Perhaps the artist felt that Justinian and Theodora, accompanied by their courtiers, were a suitable counterpart for the Venetian doge and his wife, who were accompanied by their own courtiers. Samuel Montiége has argued that Benjamin-Constant was strongly influenced by Jean-Paul Laurens's painting *The Byzantine Emperor Honorius* (1880) as well as by Victorien Sardou's play about Theodora (1884), and that all of Paris was "set ablaze" with unprecedented "Oriental fever" during the 1880s.^[73] We know that just prior to executing the Ames murals, Benjamin-Constant had completed paintings of both Theodora and Justinian, so he may have wished to integrate elements of his prior work. In the absence of definitive evidence, however, we are left to speculate as to why Benjamin-Constant would have chosen four Byzantine figures for the apex of this Boston brownstone.

Conclusion

Benjamin Constant's murals in the Ames House in Boston were not meant to teach a history lesson or to convey a moral message. Instead, their purpose was to create an ambiance that reflected the social status of the client and to harmonize with their architectural context. More specifically, they were intended to complement the work of architect John Sturgis, which itself was aimed to create an appropriate residence for one of Boston's wealthiest residents.

Appendix 1

Letter from Benjamin-Constant to Mrs. Frederick Ames (?)

Citation: The letter is transcribed in Margaret Henderson Floyd, "Mural Cycle of Justinian by Benjamin Constant for John Hubbard Sturgis's Frederick L. Ames House [at] 306 Dartmouth Street [in] Boston," [unpublished manuscript], 1-5, Margaret Henderson Floyd Papers, Historic New England Library and Archives, Boston, Mass. The original letter is presumed lost.

"Dear Madame:

My friend Eugene Glaenzer told me that you were very anxious to have a little explanatory note about your decorations, and I hasten to give it to you.

Your large staircase being of the Renaissance style, nothing could be more appropriate and harmonize better than Venetian subjects of the time of Veronese, and composed in the sentiment of the school for Veronese. Thus, on a ground of architectures borrowed from the best known monuments of Venice.

A "Doge" (chiefs of Venice and Genoa) – Dandolo or another, receives from the hands of an Oriental prince, son of a Khalif of the Islands of the Archipelago, the keys of some city or island conquered by the fleets of the "Serenissime" Republic. The "Doge" has on a gold cap called "Corno" and is dressed in a gothic velvet cloak, woven of red and gold. On his right stands an Ambassador of France or England, who came perhaps to borrow money from the "Serenissime" Republic, in order to equip armies for some Crusade in the Holy Land, including the transportation by the Galleys of Venice.

Finally, on the left of the "Doge," we find a Senator, first Counsellor of the State, followed by other great lords. On the panel, opposite, the procession continues and the "Dogaresse," followed by three young Patrician women and a mistress of ceremony, advances, leaning on the shoulder of a little girl, hers without doubt? An old Master of the Palace, followed by a colored Prince, walks ahead. As you see, dear Madame, the subject is not too much complicated, and most easy to remember. I have chosen it especially on account of the staircase and of the costumes of the Sixteenth century, which are always of so decorating a color and richness.

As to the ceiling, if we take the arching which frames the glass windows which consequently is in the dark, I have used the gold in mosaic to lighten the vault. This brought me to compose in the Byzantine style. But Byzance and Venice go hand in hand. "St. Marc and the ducal Palace."

The first figure draped in the "Trabea" large cloak of ceremony of the time, represents Justinian, the greatest emperor of the "Bas-Empire" [Byzantine Empire] after "Constantin," and the greatest legislator known.

For the most part, our laws derive from "Justinian's" from that great compilation of works which goes as far back as "Lycurgus and Solon," to come back to the "Gracchi, Augustus,

Constantin, Marcus Aurelius.” Immense gathering of laws, which were taken up again by Justinian and his counsellors to form “panacea” still in use in all schools of law, and which are called “Institutes.”

Justinian, for instance, was never a great warrior, but he had “Belisaire” to take his place in the army. He could not have chosen better. Nevertheless, as it sometimes happens, this noble “Autocrater” this great “Basileus” (this is the way the emperors of Byzance used to be described) had his weaknesses – he espoused Theodora. But this “Parvenue” made [him?] forget her plebeian origin by being at the Emperor’s side an Empress who, in difficult moments, amidst an unruly, agitated, cultivated and perverted population, knew for a long while how to inspire them with the fear of her power. In short, a strange figure, and very worthy sovereign of a falling Empire.

But in order to come back to my decorations, Theodora is the figure draped in green, and wearing the Byzantine crown. Opposite, the one draped in red is a Patrician woman, one of her attendants of roman origin. Facing Justinian we find the first Counsellor of the Empire. He is writing under the dictation of his master.

Pardon me, dear Madame, to have made so poor an exhibition of knowledge, “erudition of Cicerone.” But really [I] dare not say more; first because I do not know more about it; because you have books in your Library speaking of it all, and finally because you are an American – and are not Americans, among all women, the most cultivated?

I therefore beg you, dear Madame, to excuse me a thousand times. I wish to remain but your painter, and under this title, I beg to add the assurance of my best feelings.”

Christopher Carlsmith is Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. He was an Italian Fulbright scholar in 1996–97 and a Fellow at Harvard University’s Villa I Tatti Center for the Study of the Italian Renaissance in 2008–09. In Spring 2016, he will be a Fellow at the University of Bologna’s Institute for Advanced Study. Carlsmith has published *A Renaissance Education: Schooling in Bergamo and the Venetian Republic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), and co-edited with Maria Mencaroni Zoppetti, *Per una storia della cultura e della società a Bergamo. Indagini e percorsi nel Cinquecento e Seicento* [Toward a Social and Cultural History of Bergamo: Investigations into the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries] (Bergamo: Sestante Edizioni, 2013). He is currently working on a study of Italian residential student colleges in early modern Bologna.

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Notes

In addition to the archivists and librarians recognized in the notes below, I would like to thank Petra Chu, Katie Hanson, and Frederick Ilchman for their erudite advice on revising this essay, Robert Alvin Adler for copyediting, and Benn Craig for assistance with the photographs.

[1] For details on the condition of the murals, see the conservation survey, “Murals in the Dome of the Ames-Webster Mansion by Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant,” by Harriet Irgang Alden of Rustin Levenson Art Conservation Associates, Ltd, completed May 8–9, 2013; I am grateful to Samuel Montière for sharing a copy of this document with me in the spring of 2014.

[2] The unpublished paper is Margaret Henderson Floyd, “Mural Cycle of Justinian by Benjamin-Constant for John Hubbard Sturgis’s Frederick L. Ames House [at] 306 Dartmouth Street [in] Boston,” Margaret Henderson Floyd Papers, Historic New England Library and Archives, Boston. My thanks to archivist Lorna Condon for helping me to unearth this typed manuscript. Floyd published an abstract of her paper, delivered to the Society of Architectural Historians in Boston in April 1975: Margaret Henderson Floyd, “Another French Connection for American Mural Painting: The Justinian Cycle by Benjamin-Constant for a Back Bay Queen Anne Palace,” *JSAH* 34, no. 4 (December 1975): 312. Floyd was preparing a monograph on the architectural firm Sturgis and Brigham but died in 1997 before it could be published. Some of her slides are preserved in the Margaret Henderson Floyd Slide Collection at Tufts University. In 2009 Landvest, Inc. prepared a brief history of the house in preparation for its sale. This fourteen-page “Property Profile” of 306 Dartmouth Street, which includes floor plans, photographs, and a cursory history, was kindly provided to me by Carol Lloyd. Two publications are: Christopher Carlsmith, “The Byzantine and Venetian Cycles in the Boston Mansion of Frederick L. Ames,” in *Benjamin-Constant: Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism*, ed. Nathalie Bondil, exh. cat. Montreal: Museum of Fine Arts (Paris: Les Éditions Hazan, 2014), 322–29; and Christopher Carlsmith, “Venetian & Byzantine Wall Murals in the Ames-Webster House of Boston’s Back Bay,” *Journal of Historic New England* 15, no. 3 (Winter 2015): 26–29. The present article offers additional historical context and descriptive analysis, as well as the first publication of Benjamin-Constant’s own explanation of the murals.

[3] The house remained in the Ames family following the death of Frederick Lothrop Ames in 1893, and his wife Rebecca in 1903; five Ames children inhabited the house at that time and several remained there until the death of Frederick L. Ames, Jr. in 1921. See *The Boston Directory* (Boston: Sampson, Murdock & Co) for the years 1893–1921; this annual publication included residential addresses for all residents of Boston; and “306 Dartmouth,” BackBayHouses.org, accessed June 19, 2014, <http://backbayhouses.org/306-dartmouth>. The house was then purchased for \$156,666 by engineer Edwin S. Webster on June 7, 1923. See Deed of Sale, “Old Colony Trust Co. et al Gdns. [Guardians] to Webster,” (June 7, 1923), Suffolk Registry of Deeds, Book 4475, pages 621–25, Brooke Courthouse, Boston. In July 1971, the house was bought for \$248,617 from the Webster estate by Neil St. John (Ted) Raymond, who transformed the single-family home into professional office suites in 1973, largely maintaining the building’s artistic and architectural integrity (including the murals and decoration in question). See Deed of Sale, Suffolk Registry of Deeds, Book 8461, 546–48 (July 20, 1971). In March 2013, 306 Dartmouth Street was sold to FAL Boston LLC, for \$14,500,000, and is no longer open to the public. See Suffolk Registry of Deeds, Book 51141, 272 (March 18, 2013).

[4] Nathalie Bondil, “Which History Painting? Benjamin-Constant States His Case,” in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 51.

[5] The exhibition, *Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism: From Spain to Morocco, Benjamin-Constant in His Time*, was at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts January 31–May 31, 2015; it was co-curated by Nathalie Bondil and Axel Hémerly. The renovation of the Ames-Webster house began in 2013 under the direction of architect Kahlil Hamady, following its purchase that year.

[6] Benjamin-Constant wrote the undated letter (included here as [Appendix 1](#)) to Mrs. Frederick Ames sometime between the completion of the murals in 1890 and his own death in 1902. In eight paragraphs, the artist describes the principal characters, the background, and the historical context he had in mind for all six murals. Despite the letter’s abundance of detail linking the procession to either late medieval or Renaissance Venice, and the portraits to sixth-century Byzantium, Benjamin-Constant is frustratingly vague about the events and people depicted. Indeed, his written explanations and visual details make the subject of the painting deliberately generic. A transcription of the letter appears in Floyd, “Mural Cycle of Justinian,” 1–5; [Appendix 1](#) reproduces that transcription. Floyd thanks Mrs. Charles Hovey for making a copy of this letter available, but does not say where the letter is located. Floyd, “Mural Cycle of Justinian,” 1n1. Presumably it was in a private collection. The reference to “Mrs. Charles Hovey” is probably to Anita C. (Hinckley) Hovey (1911–2003) of Chestnut Hill, MA and later of Narragansett, RI; she was a member of the Chilton Club, the Colonial Dames, and many other social organizations (see her obituary in the *Providence Journal Bulletin* of July 16, 2003). Her husband Charles F. Hovey was Trustee for Edwin S. Webster’s estate in 1971 and led the sale of 306 Dartmouth Street (Deed of Sale, Registry of Deeds [July 20, 1971]). It seems probable that the letter passed from

the Ameses to the Websters when the house was sold in 1923, and thus was in the possession of the Websters when Margaret Henderson Floyd saw it. Mrs. Hovey's son, Charles Hovey, in a telephone conversation with the author on December 7, 2013, said it is likely that the letter was thrown out when the Websters moved out in the early 1970s. I have found no trace of the letter in Boston-area archives. The transcription by Floyd is in English; there is no indication in her manuscript about whether it was originally in French or in English. Benjamin-Constant's letter of 1887 to Godfrey Mannheimer (Benjamin-Constant to GG Mannheimer, February 1887, M3153, ff. 3-6 and 9-10, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives) bears a notation that that letter was translated from French into English. Benjamin-Constant wrote regularly in English, however, as evident in his publications, and thus his letter to Mrs. Ames could well have been written in English. Benjamin-Constant addressed the letter to "Dear Madam" and he identified himself as "your painter." Margaret Henderson Floyd says that the letter was intended for Mrs. Edwin S. Webster, but given that Mrs. Webster did not move in to the house until 1923 (twenty-one years after Benjamin-Constant's death), that seems very unlikely. The recipient of the letter must have been Mrs. Rebecca Caroline (Blair) Ames, who married Frederick Lothrop Ames; Rebecca Ames was listed as the owner of 306 Dartmouth Street in 1883, 1888, and 1898 on the Bromley fire insurance maps, formally known as the *Atlases of the City of Boston*, published by G.W. Bromley & Co., 1883 and subsequent years. Benjamin-Constant began by observing that "my friend Eugene Glaenzer told me that you were very anxious to have a little explanatory note about your decorations, and I hasten to give it to you." Eugene Glaenzer ([?]-1923) was a prominent art dealer in New York; in 1888 he headed the gallery Boussod, Valadon, et Cie at 303 Fifth Avenue, representing Benjamin-Constant; he was the author of *The Renaissance of Art in America* and later worked with French art dealers Jacques Seligmann and his son Germain Seligman [sic] in Paris and New York, respectively. As discussed below, Frederick Ames purchased the murals for 306 Dartmouth through Boussod, Valadon, et Cie in 1888.

[7] The first half of Benjamin-Constant's career (ca. 1869–89) focused primarily on history paintings; the second half (ca. 1890–1902) emphasized portraits. In addition, he completed several ceiling paintings in Paris during the 1890s. The artist's popularity with an American audience is cogently analyzed in Janet M. Brooke, "For Fame and Fortune: A French Painter in the New World," in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 313–21. Brooke notes that the Ames-Webster commission was not Benjamin-Constant's only North American decorative commission, but provides no further details. *Ibid.*, 320n36. Benjamin-Constant completed decorative panels for Oliver Ames (cousin of Frederick L. Ames) also in Back Bay, but those works have not survived. *Ibid.*, 318.

[8] Stephen Muthesius, *The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Interior* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2009).

[9] Margaret Henderson Floyd, "Touring through Time to the Heart of the Back Bay: Boylston and Dartmouth Streets with Copley Square," in *Victorian Boston Today: Twelve Walking Tours*, ed. Mary Melvin Petronella (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 61–82, esp. 79; and Bainbridge Bunting, *Houses of Boston's Back Bay: An Architectural History, 1840–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967), 260–62. For very brief histories of the house, see also Douglas Shand Tucci, *Built in Boston: City and Suburb, 1800–1950* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1978), 46–50; Donlyn Lyndon, *The City Observed, Boston: A Guide to the Architecture of the Hub* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 133–34; and Susan Southworth and Michael Southworth, *ALA Guide to Boston* (Chester, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 1984), 256–57.

[10] The drawings for the original buildings (1871) are preserved in the Peabody & Stearns Collection, Arts Department, Boston Public Library; scans of selected drawings were made available in 2014 courtesy of Hamady Architects LLC and First Boston Realty, at "306 Dartmouth," Back Bay Houses.org., accessed June 19, 2014, <http://backbayhouses.org/306-dartmouth>. The lot size today is 10,956 square feet. Robert Swain Peabody (1845–1917) and John Goddard Stearns, Jr. (1843–1917) founded the firm Peabody and Stearns in 1870 in Boston. In addition to the house at 306 Dartmouth St. (built ca. 1872), they completed numerous other residential projects, such as The Breakers in Newport (1878, burned in 1892), The Brooks Estate in Medford, MA (1880), and Rough Point in Newport (1887–92); they also designed Matthews Hall at Harvard (1871), multiple buildings at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey (1882), Worcester City Hall in Worcester, MA (1898), and the Boston Exchange Building in Boston (1887–91). Property deeds for 306 Dartmouth Street at the Suffolk Registry of Deeds, Boston, document the chain of ownership by wealthy Bostonians back to the mid-nineteenth century; for example, Deed of Sale, Suffolk Registry of Deeds, Book 1034, 97, "Commonwealth of Massachusetts to [S.V.R.] Thayer" (January 24, 1871) for \$18,818, which deed makes reference to an even earlier plan of 1857. The Thayers were one of the leading aristocratic families in Boston; architect John H. Sturgis, who renovated the Ames-Webster house in 1882, counted 3 Thayers among his active clients in 1886. See J. H. Sturgis (1834-1888) Papers, 1853-1909, [5 boxes], Ms. L608, Box 1, folder 38, document 2, Boston Athenaeum, Boston (hereafter "Sturgis Papers").

- [11] *American Architect and Building News (AABN)* 23, no. 634 (February 18, 1888): 73. For the undated newspaper clipping, see Sturgis Papers, Box 5, folder 9.
- [12] Much of Back Bay was created in the nineteenth century by driving wooden pilings into the shallow waters of the Charles River tidal basin.
- [13] Tucci, *Built in Boston*, 51.
- [14] Deed of Sale, Suffolk Registry of Deeds, Book 1034, 97, “Commonwealth of Massachusetts to [S. V. R.] Thayer” (January 24, 1871), 1. A minimum setback of twenty feet was required from the street, and restrictions were also spelled out for the design of doors, steps, and balustrades.
- [15] Lyndon, *City Observed, Boston*, 133–34. Lyndon makes interesting comparisons between the evolution of the Hotel Vendome, on the southwest corner of Commonwealth Avenue and Dartmouth Street, and the Ames-Webster house on the northwest corner of Commonwealth Avenue and Dartmouth Street. See also the comparisons by Tucci, *Built in Boston*, 46.
- [16] The extent of their collaboration remains a matter of speculation; I have found no extant correspondence between them in the papers of Ames, Sturgis, and LaFarge. See Ames Family Collection, Archives and Historical Collections, Stonehill College; Sturgis Papers; and La Farge Family Papers (MS 24), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. I have not been able to consult directly the papers of Benjamin-Constant, but his correspondence contained in a dozen French archives, as listed in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 388, makes no reference to Ames, Sturgis, or LaFarge.
- [17] Frederick Lothrop Ames studied at Exeter and Harvard, joined the Ames family shovel works in North Easton, and by 1876 worked his way up to treasurer of the corporation. He served briefly in the State Senate and on the boards of numerous railroads, banks, and other corporations. Ames had interests beyond the business world too. He befriended the architect H. H. Richardson and in 1877 awarded him the commission to build the Ames Free Library in Easton, MA. According to his obituary of 1893, Ames was an avid horticulturalist, and “his homes in Boston and at North Easton are filled with works of art from such masters as [Jean-Francois] Millet, [Henri] Rousseau, [Constant] Troyon, and [Jean-Baptist Camille] Corot”: see “F.L. Ames’s Sudden Death,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1893, 8. He bought dozens of French paintings through the gallery Boussod, Valadon, et Cie from 1880 to 1892, including most of the artists listed here, as well as additional paintings by Thomas Gainsborough. See the digitized versions of the gallery’s Dealer Stock Books, at the The Getty Research Institute, Getty Provenance Index, accessed June 15, 2015, <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/provenance/search.html>. See also Brooke, “For Fame and Fortune,” 319n28. The Ames family is well-documented through the Ames Family Collection (AFC) and the Arnold B. Tofias Industrial Archives (a.k.a. Ames Shovel Museum) held at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts. However, there is nothing in those archives about the murals or other decoration at 306 Dartmouth St.; my thanks to archivist Nicole Casper for her assistance. On the Ames family, see also Ann Theopold Chaplin, *Descendants of William Ames of Braintree, Massachusetts* (Boston: Newbury Street Press, 2004); Winthrop Ames, *The Ames Family of Easton, Massachusetts* (North Easton, MA: privately printed, 1938); “Bristol County MA Archives Biographies Ames, Family,” USGenWeb Project, accessed February 14, 2013; <http://files.usgwarchives.net/ma/bristol/bios/ames88gbs.txt>; and *Who’s Who in New England*, 2nd ed., ed. Albert Nelson Marquis (Chicago: A.N. Marquis & Co., 1916), 34–35. On Oliver Ames (1831–95), the equally successful cousin of Frederick Lothrop Ames, who simultaneously owned a palatial house in Back Bay and commissioned Benjamin-Constant for decorative panels and a portrait of his wife in the late 1880s, see Arnold Lewis, James Turner, and Steven McQuillin, *The Opulent Interiors of the Gilded Age* (Boston: Dover Publications, 1987), 56–57, originally published as G. W. Sheldon, *Artistic Houses* (New York: D. Appleton, 1883).
- [18] “F.L. Ames’s Sudden Death,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1893, 8.
- [19] Born in Macao, and educated both in Boston and in Europe, Sturgis practiced architecture in England in the late 1850s before moving in 1861 to Boston; in 1866 he formed a partnership with Charles Brigham that lasted for twenty years. He served as vice-president of the Boston Society of Architects, and was praised for “his power of planning [and] his skillful interior arrangements.” Obituary clippings, Box 5, folder 9, clipping no. 4 [in two copies] titled “Here in Boston” [from *American Architect and Building News*?] Sturgis Papers. On John H. Sturgis, see Margaret Henderson Floyd, “Sturgis, John Hubbard” in *Encyclopedia of American Art*, ed. Joan Marter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5:602–3, which includes additional bibliography. The Sturgis Papers at the Boston Athenaeum include correspondence, journals, sketchbooks, invoices, drawings, photographs, and ephemera but no references to 306 Dartmouth nor to Frederick L. Ames, apart from the obituaries in Box 5, folder 7. On Sturgis’s work on the Ames-Webster house, see Southworth and Southworth, *AIA Guide to Boston*, 256–57; and Floyd, “Mural Cycle of Justinian,” 8–17.

[20] See Margaret Henderson Floyd, *Architecture after Richardson: Regionalism Before Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 474n125, which references a manuscript by Floyd, “American Architecture in the English Image: John Hubbard Sturgis of Boston” at the John Hubbard Sturgis Archives in Weston, MA. The Sturgis Archives (now Sturgis Papers, as cited above) were moved from Weston to the Boston Athenaeum at an unknown date; I have not yet seen this manuscript. Sturgis is perhaps best remembered for introducing terra cotta into the design of the original Museum of Fine Arts in Copley Square during the 1880s.

[21] Born in New York City to wealthy French parents, LaFarge initially intended to study law but took up art after a visit to Paris in 1856. See Julie L. Sloan and James L. Yarnall, “Art of an Opaline Mind: The Stained Glass of John La Farge,” *American Art Journal* 24, nos. 1-2 (1992): 5–43; Henry Adams and others, *John La Farge*, Smithsonian Museum, Carnegie Museum of Art, and Boston Museum of Fine Arts, exh. cat. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987); Barbara Weinberg, *The Decorative Work of John LaFarge* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977); and Royal Cortissoz, *John La Farge: A Memoir and a Study* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911).

[22] The skylight—christened the *Guercino Aurora* by Barbara Weinberg for its similarity to the 1621 fresco by Guercino in the Casino Ludovosi of Rome—remains at 306 Dartmouth St.; it shows the figure of Aurora driving a chariot and scattering flowers from a basket held by a cherub. See Weinberg, *Decorative Work*, 352–56. Two windows from the western side of the great hall, dubbed *Peacock* and *Peony*, were removed in 1938 and are now at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Floyd, “Mural Cycle of Justinian,” 17n39; and Weinberg, *Decorative Work*, 353n1. Two additional windows, from either side of the fireplace at the balcony level, were sold at auction in 1972 by the Webster family and acquired by the St. Louis Art Museum. “Flowering Cherry Tree and Peony,” Saint Louis Art Museum, Object Number 31:1972.2, accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.slam.org>. An additional window from the door above the conservatory was sold to Maxwell’s Plum restaurant in New York City; the restaurant closed in 1988 and the current location of that window is unknown to me. At Yale University’s Beinecke Library, YCAL MSS 653, “Henry Adams La Farge papers relating to a catalogue raisonné of works by John La Farge” (1965–1998), Series III, Box 13, there is abundant correspondence from the period 1952–88 about the various LaFarge windows at 306 Dartmouth St, including several letters from architectural historian Margaret Henderson Floyd and former owner Ted Raymond, as well as 3 clippings from 1882–83 New York newspapers. I am grateful to Beinecke Library archivist Sandra Markham for her assistance in consulting these files.

[23] The best source is Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, which examines all aspects of Benjamin-Constant’s career and body of work; for biography, Régine Cardis, “Benjamin-Constant: The Life of the Artist,” in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 259–79. For contemporary descriptions of Benjamin-Constant, see John Murray Templeton, “Benjamin-Constant,” *Magazine of Art* 14 (1891): 181–88; *Illustrated American* 12, no. 142 (1892): 435; Alder Anderson, “A Painter of England’s Queens,” *Pearson’s Magazine* 6, no. 1 (1901): 3–9; and Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, “Tangier and Morocco: Leaves from a Painter’s Notebook,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, April 1889, 752–71, which includes numerous images and an extended autobiographical description of his experiences in North Africa.

[24] *Grove Art Online: Oxford Art Online*, s.v. “Constant, Benjamin,” by Donald A. Rosenthal, accessed March 8, 2013, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T019171> [login required]. See also Cardis, “Life of the Artist,” 267–68.

[25] Brooke, “For Fame and Fortune,” 313–14.

[26] Getty Provenance Index, “Dealer Stock Books,” PI Record number G-29699 (also Stock no. 20210), accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/provenance/search.html>. The panels in Oliver Ames’s house, commissioned on November 28, 1889, were later destroyed.

[27] Getty Provenance Index, “Dealer Stock Books,” PI Record number G-29763 (also Stock no. 20274), accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/provenance/search.html>, for 31,200 francs; the portrait of Mrs. Ames is now lost.

[28] Getty Provenance Index, “Dealer Stock Books,” PI Record number G-30453 (also Stock no. 21064), accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/provenance/search.html>; the date of payment of 96,030 francs is November 17, 1890. The *plafond* must refer to the Byzantine and Venetian murals, for this was the only commission that Benjamin-Constant did for Frederick Ames. For the artist’s travel dates to the United States, see Brooke, “For Fame and Fortune,” 314n3; and see page 318, for discussion of the commission.

[29] On his American portraits, see Brooke, “For Fame and Fortune,” 313–21; on his European portraits, see Régine Cardis, “The Cream of Society,” in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 307–10; for brief catalog entries and thumbnail reproductions of his most significant portraits, see the

appendices by Regine Cardis, Samuel Montière, and Janet M. Brooke, in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 354–64.

[30] Some of his works are discussed and illustrated in Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, “My Portraits,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, May 1901, 821–28. See also Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, “Victor Hugo as an Artist,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, December 1900, 100–9 in which, at 107, Benjamin-Constant wrote of Hugo, “He might have been as great as Delacroix if his genius had not led him to select the pen as a more forcible means of expression.” For a list of all works authored by Benjamin-Constant, see the bibliography in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 390.

[31] *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 27, 1902, 210; *Art Review*, June 1902, 2109 (both clippings are in the “Scrapbook of Benjamin-Constant, Jean-Joseph,” Ball Collection, Arts Department, Boston Public Library [no call number]). See also the long obituary in *Public Opinion* on Thursday, June 5, 1902, 719, in the subsection “Letters & Art”; and a much shorter obituary in the *Morning Post* (London), May 27, 1902 (both in the New York Public Library, Artist File, s.v. “Constant Benjamin,” Microfiche C554-A5).

[32] The profusion of flowers that surround each of the Byzantine figures, and that are interspersed with the patron’s initials, may reflect the strong interest that Frederick Ames had in horticulture. His *New York Times* obituary noted that “Mr. Ames was devoted to flowers, and his collection of orchids is said to be one of the finest in the United States.” “F.L. Ames’s Sudden Death,” 8. Ames also instructed Sturgis to add the large glass conservatory that faces on to Commonwealth Avenue, and several of the LaFarge stained-glass windows (since removed from the house) featured a flower design.

[33] In Benjamin-Constant’s letter to Mrs. Ames ([Appendix 1](#)) he used the terms “First Counsellor” and “Patrician Woman”; the artist also used the term “First Counsellor” in his 1887 letter to GG Mannheimer to describe another painting of Justinian and his advisors. Benjamin-Constant to GG Mannheimer, February 1887.

[34] Alden, “Murals in the Dome of the Ames-Webster House,” 3.

[35] *Ibid.*, 4.

[36] The *Digest*, also known as the Pandects, was a collection of Roman laws compiled at Justinian’s order. Comprising fifty volumes and organized by Tribonian, the *Digest* sought to reduce and standardize all previous law codes. Together with the *Institutes* and the *Codex Justinianus*, these three parts together make up the *Corpus Juris Civilis*. As discussed below, Benjamin-Constant explicitly identified “the Insitutions [*Institutes*] and Pandects” in describing his 1887 painting of *Justinian in Council*, so it seems likely that the scroll portrayed in the Ames murals pertains to the same document.

[37] There may be a purple sash or stole lying across Justinian’s lap, or it may simply be part of the fabric of the outer toga.

[38] On this image, see Samuel Montière, “The Emperor Justinian,” in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 70–74. A gift to the Met in 1890 by Godfrey Mannheimer (accession no. 90.27), the painting was not exhibited because of its large size (148 x 260 inches) and thus was returned at the family’s request in 1928. In that year it was sold at the American Art Association in New York to John Ringling, who bequeathed it to the Ringling Museum in 1936, where it remains in storage today; my thanks to Lauren vonBechmann at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art and to Melissa Bowling at the Metropolitan Museum Archives for their assistance. The image was reproduced in *Hutchinson’s History of the World* in 1894; for details, see the letter of H. W. Kent to Mrs. Konrad Kelley, Esq. of Mercedes, Texas, dated December 31, 1931, M3153, f. 13, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives, New York.

[39] Templeton, “Benjamin-Constant,” 182.

[40] Lynne Thornton has argued that Benjamin-Constant’s failure to win the gold medal in 1886 gradually led him to abandon history painting and Orientalism, as cited in Montière, “Emperor Justinian,” 74n17.

[41] Benjamin-Constant to GG Mannheimer, February 1887, M3153, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives. There are two versions of the letter in the file, designated ff. 3-6 and ff. 9-10, with slight variance in word choice; both bear the notation of being a translation and may have been drafts. I quote from ff. 3-6.

[42] Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, “A Glance at the Wallace Collection,” *North American Review* 171, no. 528 (November 1900): 704–11, at 710, as cited in Bondil, “Which History Painting,” 60.

[43] Letter of Benjamin-Constant to Mrs. Frederick Ames, n.d., as transcribed in Floyd, “Mural Cycle of Justinian,” and [Appendix 1](#).

[44] [Appendix 1](#). Lysurgus and Solon were legendary leaders of ancient Sparta and Athens, respectively, each of whom was credited with developing a constitution. The Gracchi (Tiberius

and Gaius Gracchus) were brothers in Rome in the second century BCE who sought land reform and constitutional changes; Augustine, Constantine, and Marcus Aurelius were each emperors of Rome.

[45] [Appendix 1](#). On Theodora, see Paolo Cesaretti, *Theodora: Empress of Byzantium* (New York: Vendome Press, 2004).

[46] On the 1887 *Theodora*, see Montière, “Empress Theodora,” 80–85. This painting was described in Benjamin-Constant’s obituary in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 27, 1902, 210: “The splendor in which the artist robed and bejewelled her is wonderful. She sits in a marble chair, a picture of haughty insolence, and like a burning eye, an enormous ruby gleams in her crown of gold. There is ever so much of detail in this canvas, and a masterly treatment of the rich draperies, the brilliant jewels and the other accessories.” As Montière makes clear, Benjamin-Constant painted numerous versions of Theodora. It is not clear why a Boston newspaper would have selected this particular work for emphasis; it was exhibited at the Salon in 1887 and then disappeared until 1911 when it emerged in Buenos Aires.

[47] Most of the figures in the 1886 *Justinian in Council* have religious designs painted onto their robes, as this man does. An article in the *New York Times* of April 11, 1886 declared of *Justinian in Council* that “as to the costumes, they are authentic, having been copied from documents and manuscripts of the period, these having been loaned to Constant by the National Library. In order that they might be precise . . . they were cut and embroidered in silken floss, jewels, and gold by a dexterous modeler, under the eyes and critical supervision of Constant and in his own studio.” Cited in Montière, “Emperor Justinian,” 70n3.

[48] *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1996), s.v. “Tribonian.” Another possible identification is the chronicler Procopius, who wrote a panegyric on Justinian’s public works as well as a history of the wars fought by Justinian; most famously, Procopius wrote a *Secret History* that claimed to report scandals that Procopius could not include elsewhere (including the most provocative claims against Theodora). However, Procopius was a chronicler, not a counsellor, whereas Tribonian was intimately involved with Justinian’s projects for many years, especially the *Corpus Juris Civilis*; furthermore, Tribonian was named as a close advisor to the Emperor in Benjamin-Constant’s 1887 letter to Godfrey Mannheimer.

[49] The figure of Antonina has no distinguishing characteristics here, but she was a major figure at the Byzantine court. On Antonina, see James Allan Evans, *The Power Game in Byzantium: Antonina and the Empress Theodora* (London: Continuum, 2011).

[50] Benjamin-Constant to Mrs. Frederick Ames, [Appendix 1](#).

[51] *Illustrated American* 12, no. 142 (1892): 435. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, a friend and rival of Benjamin-Constant, is well known for having painted in his French studio the murals destined for the Boston Public Library in 1895–96. Benjamin-Constant visited North America six times, including extended visits to the Eastern seaboard in 1888, 1889, and 1890.

[52] The *Zecca* (mint) was designed by Sansovino between 1537 and 47, and added to by Scamozzi later in the same century. However, notice that the building in the background turns the wrong way, i.e., toward the viewer rather than away.

[53] Benjamin-Constant to Mrs. Ames, [Appendix 1](#). Note that in both the Byzantine cycle and in this Venetian cycle, Benjamin-Constant uses an identical term of “first Counsellor.”

[54] Emmanuelle Antonio Cicogna and others, *Storia dei dogi di Venezia* (Venice: G. Grimaldo, 1863), 1:n.p. for Enrico Dandolo (r. 1192–1205), Giovanni Dandolo (r. 1280–89), Francesco Dandolo (r. 1328–39), and Andrea Dandolo (r. 1342–54).

[55] Most fifteenth-century doges (for example, from Tommaso Mocenigo (r. 1413–23) to Cristoforo Moro (r. 1462–1471) were clean-shaven; beginning with Agostino Barbarigo (r. 1486–1501) most doges had a full beard until the 1620s when Antonio Priuli (r. 1618–23) and his successors changed to a smaller goatee and mustache. *Ibid.*, 2:n.p.

[56] On the *Stato da Mar*, see Benjamin Arbel, “Venice’s Maritime Empire in the Early Modern Period,” in *A Companion to Venetian History, 1400–1797*, ed. Eric Dursteller (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 125–253, esp. 125–28.

[57] Benjamin-Constant to Mrs. Ames, [Appendix 1](#).

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] See Holly S. Hurlburt, *The Dogaressa of Venice, 1200–1500: Wife and Icon* (New York: Palgrave/St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

[60] The generic *Venetian Scene* is at VADS, Visual Arts Data Service of the University for the Creative Arts, accessed August 22, 2013, <http://www.vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=84451>. The painting is undated, but is estimated to be 1875–80. *Venetian Palace Interior with Notables* (n.d.) was

sold in Brussels at Beaux-Arts Servarts group on June 7, 2004, lot 41; it is cited in the “List of Illustrations” in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 329, 385 (illustration no. 446).

[61] Sold by Christie’s in Paris, Sale 3538, lot 258, Collection Hélène Rochas, September 27, 2012 for \$6,774; details and an image at Christies, accessed August 23, 2013, <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/LotDetailsPrintable.aspx?intObjectID=5600789>.

[62] *In a Gondola* (n.d.), signed by Benjamin-Constant and dedicated to E. Glæzner; sold in Paris by Christie’s in Paris, Sale 5566, lot 22, June 16, 2009; cited in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 328, 385 (illustration no. 444).

[63] *Venice: The Return of the Envoy* signed by the artist in lower left, from the Schaus Galleries, New York. It was sold at the estate sale of Commodore Elbridge T. Gerry, February 2-3, 1928; see the New York Public Library Artist File for Benjamin-Constant. A single sheet numbered at the bottom 63, perhaps clipped from an auction catalog, contains this image. The same image is identified in Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 329, 385 (illustration no. 445) as *The Doge of Venice with the Captain of the Fleet*. It sold in New York at Christie’s on February 26, 1982, lot 73.

[64] “Princesses Vénitiennes et leur garde maure,” Christie’s, Sale 5514, lot 12, June 3, 2008, Paris, for \$7,792. Details and an image at Christies, accessed August 23, 2013, <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/jean-joseph-benjamin-constant-princesses-venitiennes-et-5088466-details.aspx>. See also Bondil, *Marvels and Mirages*, 329, 384 (illustration no. 447).

[65] Floyd, “Another French Connection,” 312.

[66] *Ibid.*; and Floyd, “Mural Cycle of Justinian,” 11–12.

[67] Weinberg claims that LaFarge’s windows were “merged in the decorative scheme with . . . mural paintings by the French artist Benjamin Constant;” this is not possible as the murals were done in 1889–90, and the windows in 1882, but Weinberg is correct when she notes that LaFarge utilized Renaissance and Baroque precedents, just as Benjamin-Constant did for the Ames-Webster house. Weinberg, *Decorative Work*, 352.

[68] Benjamin-Constant to Mrs. Ames, [Appendix 1](#). He repeated the rationale for the subject of the murals two paragraphs later, writing, “I have chosen it especially on account of the staircase and of the costumes of the sixteenth century.”

[69] James Grubb, “When Myths Lose Power: Four Decades of Venetian Historiography,” *Journal of Modern History* 58, no. 1 (March 1986): 43–46.

[70] For a more detailed description, see Herbert Small, C. Howard Walker, and Lindsay Swift, *Handbook of the New Public Library in Boston* (Boston: Curtis, 1895), 46–48.

[71] Peter A. Wick, *A Handbook to the Art and Architecture of the Boston Public Library* (Boston: Associates of the Boston Public Library, 1977), 41.

[72] Benjamin-Constant to Mrs. Frederick Ames, [Appendix 1](#).

[73] Montière, “Empress Theodora,” 80.

Illustrations

All photographs of the murals at Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts, are by the author.



Fig. 1, Exterior of Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts, in 2013. Courtesy of Back Bay Houses, <http://backbayhouses.org/306-dartmouth/>. [[return to text](#)]



Fig. 2, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *The Justinian Cycle* and *The Venetian Cycle*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas; John LaFarge, *Guercino Aurora*, 1882, stained glass skylight. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[return to text\]](#)

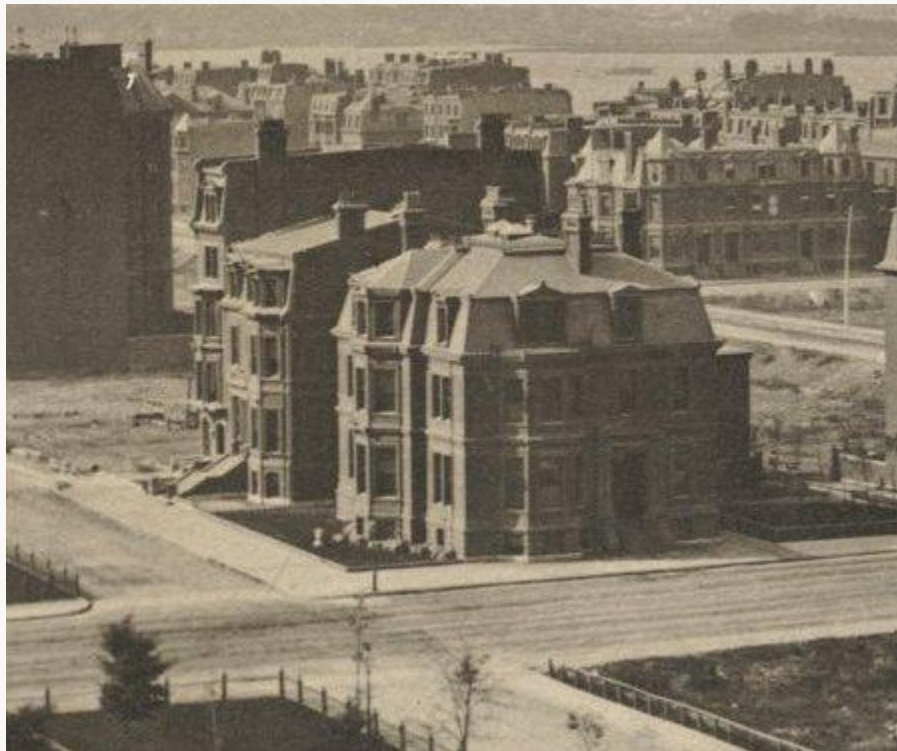


Fig. 3, Exterior of Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, from the First Baptist Church tower, Brattle Street, ca. 1875. Photograph. Courtesy of the Print Department, Boston Public Library and Back Bay Houses, <http://backbayhouses.org/306-dartmouth/>. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Exterior of Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts, ca. 1885.
Photograph. Courtesy of Historic New England. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Artist unknown, Roundel on façade of Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts, 1882. Author's photograph. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Unknown photographer, *Benjamin-Constant in his Paris Studio*, ca. 1890. Photograph. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, digital ID: 3823. "Current copyright status is undetermined," according to the Archives of American Art website, www.aaa.si.edu. [\[return to text\]](#)

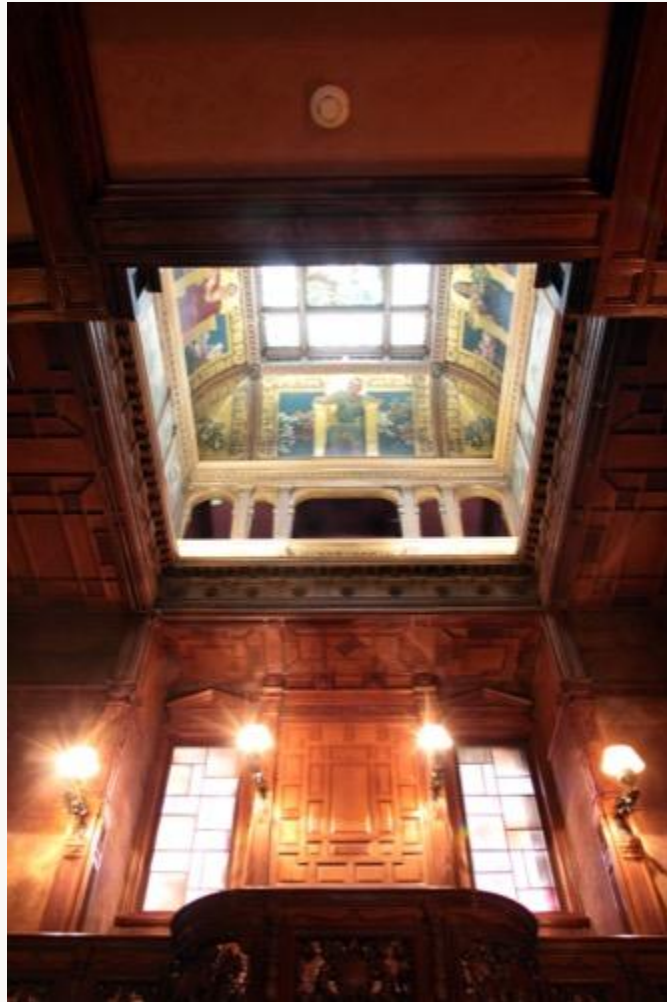


Fig. 7, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *First Counsellor*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Patrician Woman* [above] and *Venetian Cycle with Doge* [west wall], 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts.

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Fig. 9, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant *Empress Theodora* [above] and *Venetian Cycle with Dogressa* [east wall], 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts.

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Fig. 10, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Emperor Justinian*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Empress Theodora*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *First Counsellor*, 1889–80. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 13, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Patrician Woman*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas. Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 14, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, Detail of *Venetian Cycle* with Doge, 1889–90. Oil on canvas.
Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 15, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, Detail of *Venetian Cycle* with Dogaressa, 1889–90. Oil on canvas.
Ames-Webster House, 306 Dartmouth Street, Boston, Massachusetts. [\[return to text\]](#)