THE MONUMENT CIRCLE PROJECT: CURATING DIGITAL HISTORY FOR COMMUNITY DISCOURSE

Maggie Schmidt (Modupe Labode), Department of Museum Studies, IU School of Liberal Arts, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, Indianapolis, Indiana 46202

Digitized museum and library collections have transformed the knowledge landscape. The Internet enables audiences to explore high-resolution images of primary documents from around the world with a click of a button. Yet in spite of increased accessibility, many online collections remain concealed by inadequate search terms and inconsistent citation methods.

Under the guidance of Modupe Labode, Assistant Professor of History and Museum Studies at IUPUI, I curated Monument Circle Project, an online collection of primary documents, annotated research materials and an interpretive blog to frame *E Pluribus Unum*, a controversial public art proposal, within a historical context. In 2007, contemporary artist Fred Wilson proposed to re-appropriate a figure of a freed slave from the Indiana Soldiers and Sailors Monument. Community outreach meetings revealed that broader perspectives of social and racial conventions from late nineteenth-century Indianapolis – the time in which the monument was constructed – were key to understanding the controversy surrounding the proposed artwork, yet were missing from public discourse. The art project was cancelled in December 2011.

Using analyses of monuments by Austrian writer Robert Musil (1880-1942) and art historian Kirk Savage as an intellectual framework, I utilized Flickr.com, an image hosting and online community forum, and WordPress.com, an open source blogging tool, to curate and interpret primary documents from archives across the country. I developed standards to organize and manage these documents with the goal of increasing public visibility on life in Indianapolis during the turn of the twentieth century. Monument Circle Project demonstrates how digital history can add valuable and rich commentary to contemporary issues.