

THE PROJECT

“National Monument Audit,” Monument Lab (September 2021)

Download the full report at monumentlab.com/audit.

WHAT THEY DID

In 2020–21, Monument Lab—a nonprofit public art and history organization—gathered data from sources around the country to assess the country’s commemorative landscape. Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as part of their \$250 million-dollar “Monuments Project,” the project investigated where monuments are located along with who and what they commemorate to draw conclusions about the way history is addressed in public spaces. They produced a report along with a mapped, searchable dataset of nearly fifty thousand monuments. You can find both at monumentlab.com/audit.

WHAT THEY FOUND

The report’s four primary findings about the country’s monument landscape are:

Monuments have always changed: The audit’s data set shows that “monuments are not timeless, permanent, or untouchable.” Monuments change over time from natural processes. We alter or add to monuments as circumstances change; for example, 342 names have been added to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial since its dedication. Communities also take on more substantial changes to their monuments during times of social upheaval. Our monument landscape has always changed and will continue to change in ways big and small.

Monuments are overwhelmingly white and male: Our current monument landscape distorts history through a narrow focus on white men and does not adequately or accurately reflect the diversity of the country or of our past. Among the top fifty individuals most frequently represented in monuments in the United States, forty-three of them are white men, and fully half of them enslaved other people. To acknowledge the complexity and multiplicity of our history more fully and more appropriately, we will need to “support a profound shift in representation.”

Monuments typically reflect themes of war and conquest: The audit found that “violence is the most dominant subject of commemoration across the nation.” For example, nearly 6,000 monuments across the country mention the Civil War, while only 9 represent post-Civil War Reconstruction. A third of all monuments in the audit’s study set represent war.

Monuments currently misrepresent the history of the United States: By reflecting the perspectives of the privileged, monuments can perpetuate inequalities and injustices, suppress the acknowledgement of a fuller history of the country, and distort our representations of the past. For example, there are only 2 monuments to U.S. Congresswomen, while there are 22 monuments depicting mermaids. The United States has more monuments of Saint Francis of Assisi (73) and Joan of Arc (26) than of Frederick Douglass (19).

WHY IT MATTERS FOR YOU

Monument removal and reinterpretation continues to animate our visitors and community members. This report—along with the project’s map and dataset—can help provide important perspective for history professionals asked to comment on local monuments.

The authors of the report call on us as history professionals “to work with communities to contend with the sites and symbols they have inherited in meaningful and intentional ways.” As trusted sources of information about the past, history professionals can use this report to help community members, journalists, elected officials, and others better understand the issues and questions surrounding monuments, “reflect on how and why they evolve over time,” and place local monuments fit within a broader regional and national context.