MU Student frames history
Rachel Liberty leaves her legacy alongside Jefferson’s with her display design

MU ARCHITECTURAL STUDIES SPRING 2016 GRADUATE RACHAEL LIBERTY ALREADY HAS LEFT HER MARK ON HISTORY.

Liberty, 27, designed the display within which Thomas Jefferson’s original tombstone plaque is on view in Jesse Hall at the University of Missouri. Liberty, winner of a 2014 student design competition, devised a clear acrylic case for the epitaph that incorporates the emphasis on geometric shapes she notes in Jefferson’s own architectural work. Liberty also sought to recreate through her use of materials the appeal the plaque had when it was attached to Jefferson’s tombstone at his home, Monticello.

“People were really drawn to the charisma of Thomas Jefferson, and they wanted to take a piece of him with them,” Liberty says. “Unfortunately, that resulted in the vandalism of his headstone.”

Indeed, the vandalism spurred by Jefferson’s appeal is the reason his epitaph is housed on the Missouri campus.

Souvenir seekers chipped pieces from Jefferson’s grave marker when it stood at Monticello, prompting the construction of a new monument and the eventual donation of the president’s gravestone to the University of Missouri, according to the website run by Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., a nonprofit organization that maintains Monticello.

The white marble epitaph plaque—measuring roughly 24 inches by 30 inches and weighing in at approximately 125 pounds—has belonged to MU since 1883, MU design services manager Michael Stornello says in an email. Restored by the Smithsonian’s Museum Conservation Institute, the plaque took up residence in its current spot last fall.

Liberty sought to make that new home welcoming to visitors by using the clear encasement to protect the plaque, rather than the waist-high wall she initially envisioned surrounding it. The case places the plaque at the same angle as it would have been while resting on the original Jefferson obelisk, and a shadow obelisk behind it helps place the plaque in its initial design context, Liberty says.

Liberty’s design also visually connects the plaque to MU. The original Jesse Hall doorway frames the epitaph display, while the renovated plaque now sits atop repurposed wood beams from MU’s Switzler Hall.

“It’s definitely a prideful piece in my portfolio and a highlight of my education at the University of Missouri.”

RACHAEL LIBERTY

PHOTO BY RUTH TOFLE