In 2008, art enthusiast Paul R. Jones donated a 1,700-piece collection of African American art to The University of Alabama, establishing the College of Arts and Sciences’ Paul R. Jones Collection of American Art. This past fall, the collection served as a catalyst for kids in elementary and middle school to discuss race and society.

Fall 2014 was the first semester of the Paul R. Jones Collection of American Art K-12 Fellowship Program, in which children from underserved Tuscaloosa schools viewed the collection and then created their own art inspired by what they saw. University of Alabama students earned service-learning credit volunteering in the kids’ classrooms and serving as mediators between the collection and the children. The UA interns worked with two art teachers, 22 students at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School and 15 students at Westlawn Middle School.

“It was an amazing experience because I think it gave us a chance for the students to be able to cultivate their artistic talents and it gave us interns a chance to cultivate our teaching skills,” says Kiara Hill, a third-year graduate student in the gender and race studies department.

Interns received independent-study credit through NEW 310 and ARH 598. The program began with the UA students learning about and discussing community service and engagement. In October, the interns brought the elementary and middle school classes for a tour of the Paul R. Jones Gallery, then spent two to three hours a week over eight weeks working in the kids’ classrooms, helping them create their own art. The semester ended with a showcase of the children’s work at the Jones Gallery, which was open to the public.

“These children had the idea that art wasn’t for them,” says Lucy Curzon, associate professor of contemporary and modern art history and director of education and outreach for the Paul R. Jones Collection. “They didn’t have access to art, they’d never been to a gallery before. We really tried to break down those barriers and think of art as something that you have in your everyday life and that creative activity is all around us.”

Curzon said the children learned to see art as a way to express themselves, and this led to conversations about race and identity. Sarah Johns, a sophomore New College major with a depth study in pre-art therapy, says she was surprised about how effectively fifth grade students were able to use art to project thoughts about the differences and similarities between groups of people.

“Art is a very important medium for this kind of commentary because it’s so accessible and it’s a way of communicating without having to verbalize things,” Johns says. “I think that helps when you’re working with students this young because they don’t necessarily have the words to articulate what they’re thinking, but it’s a lot easier to express that through art.”

Johns says she was amazed at the kids’ insight and understanding of the cultural and racial context of the art they viewed and translated into their own art. The fifth graders created clay masks as their art project, to represent the experience of being African American and feeling the need to mask one’s identity and hide behind stereotypes. The kids used different colors and carved designs into the clay to represent their individual personalities. They also read and discussed the poem “We Wear the Mask” by African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Hill’s class of eighth graders at Westlawn Middle School created portraits to explore their identities. Each student painted three or four different portraits and used details like hairstyle, jewelry or clothes to express their individuality.

“They used it as an opportunity to show people what they could do,” Hill says. “They wanted to prove something to their peers as well as prove something to themselves. I think they even surprised themselves with what they were capable of doing.”

Hill says exposing the students to the Paul R. Jones Collection of American Art was important because it served as inspiration and showcased African American role models in students’ lives.

Students in ARH 598 and NEW 310 use art as a medium to talk about race, class and society with children in elementary and middle schools.

BY EMILY WILLIAMS | PHOTOS BY POPLEDGETHER AND MATTHEW WOOD
and middle schools in 2015 and eventually implement it in high schools.

Hill says one of the most important parts of the experience for her was connecting the students to the University and getting them excited about higher education. Exposing them to new opportunities, she says, broadened their outlook on the world.

“You have to create an environment where students have a chance to learn or we can’t expect them to be well-rounded individuals,” Hill says. “I’ve learned how important it is to expose students to culture so they have something to pull from when they want to express themselves creatively.”

A particularly rewarding moment for Johns came when she brought children to the gallery for the first time. She says she was impressed with how deeply they were able to connect with the art.

“After we had been on the field trip to the Jones Gallery, one of my little girls looked at me and said, ‘This art gallery feels like a home,’” Johns says. “That really embodied what we were trying to teach them: that art is for everyone; it’s not exclusive.”

Cuzon says K-12 art programs are struggling because of economic hardship and a lack of teachers. She says the arts are undervalued in comparison to core subject materials, so they are the first to face financial cutbacks.

Her goal for the Paul R. Jones Collection of American Art K-12 Fellowship Program is not only to impact the schools while UA interns are working there, but also to make substantial improvements to art programs in the long term.

“What the program is trying to do and the reason we wanted to invest so much effort in it is to put resources into a system that has too few and, in so doing, to help change the infrastructure,” Cuzon says.

She hopes to expand the program to other elementary and middle schools in 2015 and eventually implement it in high schools.

Abel Phillips, art teacher at MLK Jr. Elementary school, says most of his students had never been to an art gallery before. They were excited to earn recognition for their work throughout the semester and to see their art on display at the showcase.

“I think this experience has made my students strive to be better artists, knowing that their artwork may have the opportunity to be shown in a public space,” Phillips says. “They learned that art doesn’t have to be perfect and that anyone can be an artist, no matter where you’re from or what your background is.”

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Students interested in the Paul R. Jones Collection of American Art K-12 Fellowship Program can find an application at paulrjonescollection.as.ua.edu/apply. For more information, contact Lucy Cuzon at lcuzon@ua.edu or 205-348-6458.