Thanks to the generous endowment of the Powell Art Internship Fund I was able to spend my summer working for The Johnson Collection, a private collection specializing in the art of the American South, in Spartanburg, South Carolina. I spent eight weeks of my summer as the collection’s curatorial intern, working directly under the curator, Harmony Haskins, Sewanee C’92. I gained a tremendous amount of knowledge of both the working and art worlds through this experience. Through networking, office work and general experience, I feel much more equipped to jump into the workforce once I have graduated from Sewanee than I did at the beginning of the summer.

One aspect of my internship that is important to note is how I came across it. At the beginning of the Easter semester of my junior year I participated in Beyond the Gates, a program provided through Sewanee’s Career and Leadership Development office. In this program, each student participant is paired with a mentor for the three days of workshops, networking events and lectures. My mentor was the previously mentioned Sewanee alumna Harmony Haskins, who was a perfect match with interests in Art and American Studies. Through our shared passions as well as our mutual common Sewanee experience, a connection was quickly made. By the second day of Beyond the Gates, Harmony and I were planning how I could spend my summer working for The Johnson Collection. This experience alone reinforced an idea that I had previously known but had not truly understood: that Sewanee, as a University, provides some of the best networking opportunities available through its large network of loyal alumni. As the Easter semester continued, Harmony and I kept in touch and we eventually made our initial plan a reality. Before I knew it, I found myself in Spartanburg ready for my summer work to begin.
The Johnson Collection is a private collection of fine art from the American South owned by George Dean Johnson and his family. The following excerpt is a description of the collection from their website:

The Johnson Collection is comprised of over 600 works of art, with pieces ranging from the 1700s to the present, and collectively reflects the history and culture of the American South. The Johnson family is committed to enriching their community by providing a chance to interact with significant works of art.¹

The collection includes a very knowledgeable staff of three, plus an intern. During the school year the collection takes advantage of the local colleges and universities in the area by selecting their interns from those student bodies. Since their internship program began, I am the first to come from Sewanee, though hopefully not the last.

The duties of my internship were centered on the general management of the collection. Working with software specific to the needs of managing such a body of work, I completed extensive bibliographical research on artists within the collection, researched and added any information missing from the collection’s database, organized and produced folders for all artwork, and managed and reorganized the extensive selection of books, magazines and brochures on art within the library. Though such work proved to be tedious at times, by the end of it I had the enjoyment and satisfaction of successfully completing these large tasks that have continued to benefit the organization of the collection even though my internship has come to an end. This work also greatly assisted in my current knowledge of the artists that I studied through my research. Before I started my internship I had a basic knowledge of Southern artists but I have since filled in any gaps with a greater amount of information than I initially believed that I would. The greatest contributing factor to the attainment of the knowledge that I now hold was

¹ http://thejohnsoncollection.org/pages/collection.aspx
my close interaction with the actual paintings of the collection. I was given access to most pieces within this vast assortment of fine art and had the opportunity to view it closer than would ever be allowed to a patron of a museum.

My work with The Johnson Collection was not limited to the office; I also had the opportunity to work in a downtown gallery space designated for shows featuring series based on specific themes. Throughout the summer this space was open to the public each Wednesday afternoon as well as the first Thursday of the month for downtown Spartanburg’s Art Walk, which featured five downtown galleries open in the evening for viewing. During these times, I was responsible for general crowd management, covering logistics of operating a gallery and helping to make a reception or opening successful, and answering questions from the public or directing individuals to the appropriate staff member. This ended up being my favorite aspect of the job based on my interaction with the community of Spartanburg. All sorts of people came into the gallery, of varying age, socioeconomic background, education, and knowledge of art. This gallery served the basic purpose of housing the selected artwork of The Johnson Collection but it also brought a vast survey of the Spartanburg population together through the universal appreciation of art. The collection as a whole, shown in many venues within the city, accomplishes this by making fine art readily available in people’s lives, from bronze statues that are scattered throughout the downtown area to paintings in larger public buildings. Although technically a private collection it is, for the most part, shared with all members of the community and beyond. A particularly famous piece in the collection, William D. Washington’s *The Burial of Latané* (see final page), is currently on extended loan to The Virginia Museum of Art in Richmond in an exhibition commemorating the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Civil War. This is just one example of many of the Johnson’s pieces that are temporarily being shown outside of Spartanburg.
This experience greatly expanded my interest in the work of museums, collections and fine art. Through my greater gain of knowledge of the information that I was immersed in for eight weeks, my interest in this field also increased. I do believe that I prefer working in the gallery setting rather than that of the office due to the interaction with people. This internship reinforced my previous belief that I enjoy working and being around people. This is a quality of a work environment that I would like to find in my future place of employment, within the field of art or elsewhere. Contrasting this work incorporating a great deal of human interaction, I also enjoyed the intense and solitary research aspect of this internship as it expanded my knowledge of art that I was once familiar with but can now appreciate on an even greater level.

Through this experience I have also gained a greater feeling of preparedness than I had prior to my internship. This security that I can succeed in the workforce once I have graduated from Sewanee is a highly valuable result of my time at The Johnson Collection. I am now looking forward with excitement at the many possibilities that may come my way once my time as an undergraduate is up. And I know, with the experiences that I have had, that I will succeed in this as well. I would suggest this internship to any Sewanee student interested in art, American studies, Southern culture or anyone looking for a new and noteworthy insight into this interesting and ever-growing career field.