

## Hamilton Elementary students visit Tang, get close-up look at artist

Indiana Nash | June 13, 2017



Artist Willie Cole talks with Hamilton Elementary students about his life and his work. PHOTOGRAPHER: INDIANA NASH

SARATOGA SPRINGS — Hamilton Elementary School students were greeted by elaborate chess pieces as they filed into one of the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery's rooms on Monday morning.

But the students weren't there to play chess. They were there to look at, think about and interact with art on a new level.

After the 34 elementary students were settled in front of the chess pieces, artist Willie Cole came out from behind the proverbial curtain.

Cole is a prominent African American artist whose sculptures have been exhibited across the globe. Cole's chessboard piece is called "To Get to the Other Side," and while it functions as a

working chessboard, there are social commentaries on economic and social inequality, as well as race, woven throughout it.

The work was donated to the Tang in 2014, but is going to be on exhibit for the first time starting Aug. 12. Because it's such a complex piece (a 16-square-foot board with 32 pieces), Cole is working with the Tang to make sure it's exhibited correctly. He stopped by Monday morning to talk to the next generation of artists about his piece, working as an artist and how there are no mistakes, only surprises, in his line of work.

Shortly after Cole introduced himself to the Hamilton students, they began firing questions at Cole about the piece and his career as an artist.

"How long did it take you?" "What inspired you to make this?" "Why are they all holding knives?" students asked as they gazed at "To Get to the Other Side."

There was a lot to question about the unique sculpture. Each piece is a transformed lawn jockey. The pawns are jockey boys with neckties. The castles (rooks) have mismatched bundles hanging all over them. The knights have nails sticking out of their torsos and arms. |

Students wanted to know the thought process behind nearly all of the pieces.

"I'm trying not to get too heavy now because here's where the story changes," Cole said.

Each chess piece is an inverted depiction of how the piece would function in the game and as people in the United States.

"The castle is a place that you live. So my castle represents homeless people. He's carrying a lot of bundles because homeless people carry everything they own with them," Cole said.

Once the students had their fill of dissecting the meaning of the chess pieces, they wanted to know more about Cole and how he works as an artist.

"I'm addicted to art," Cole said.

It's a bug that some students already seem to have caught.

Denesh Collins, a fifth-grade student at Hamilton, started making collages and posters a year ago.

"I put them all over the house and I use things I find in the street," Collins said. As Cole often uses found objects in his work, Collins connected with Cole's work and his methods.

His classmates share Collins' affinity for art, according to Ginger Ertz, Tang's museum educator for grades K-12. She has been working with the students for the past four years, teaching them visual thinking strategies and principles of art.

"I go to hundreds of classrooms each year. ... These kids are very curious. They're willing to talk. They're very creative, too, and love doing art," Ertz said.

She came up with the field trip as a way to give students a closer look at art and what it's like to be an artist.

"We're just happy to be able to fund schools that might not otherwise be able to afford it," Ertz said.

The field trip is part of an initiative that the Tang has been working on since they received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2016. The Foundation granted \$1.2 million for increasing diversity offered in the Tang's collection and increasing public engagement within the museum.

"At the Tang, we have over 9,000 pieces," said Michael Janairo, the museum's assistant director of engagement. Only 1 percent of those pieces can be exhibited at a time. Through the grant, the Tang is building a database to provide digital access to the pieces that are not on exhibit. Museum educators are also inviting people like Cole to come and discuss topics such as diversity, identity and race.

As the field trip continued, the Hamilton students got to view a work by another famous artist, Nick Cave, and to make some art of their own.

For most of the students, art is a welcome break from their other assignments and something they excel at.

"I would say most of my students would not have this chance normally. "[Art] is an outlet for them." said Hamilton Elementary art teacher Melody York.

Shortly after Cole's talk, one student — who is also an artist — ran up to Cole and hugged him.

As Ertz and York have found out, these kids get excited about all things art, including the artists who make it.

"On the way here, students were asking me whether or not they were going to see pieces by some of the artists we had talked about in class," York said.

They may not have seen a piece by Monet, Van Gogh or other classical artists they'd talked about in the classroom, but they got the chance to do something more hands-on with a living artist.

A chance none will soon forget.