

Faith Ringgold African American Artist 1930 –

Words to know

Mix media: the use of a variety of media in a single artwork

Narrative: a spoken or written account of an event; a story

Self portrait: a portrait of the artist created by the artist

1. Photograph

Born on October 8, 1930, in Harlem, New York, Faith Ringgold is considered to be one of the most important African American artists. Working in a variety of mediums including painting, sculpture, and performance, Ringgold is best known for her “story quilts” that combine narrative with quilted borders and text. Her quilts are made from fabric, acrylic paints, black felt pen, and special canvas that can be quilted.

2. U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power, 1967, from “The American People” series, oil on canvas, 72”x96”

This painting represents Ringgold’s feelings concerning the disadvantage of being African American in the United States. Like many artists at that time, she used the American flag, posters, maps, and postage stamps as subjects of her painting. Ninety light faces and ten dark faces represent the percentages, at the time, of white and African Americans in the U.S. The dark faces and the words BLACK POWER cross to form an X. This image points out Faith’s frustration with racial inequality.

3. Tar Beach, 1988, from “Women on a Bridge” series, acrylic on canvas, tie dyed and pieced fabric, 74”x69”

On hot summer nights, Faith’s family sometimes cooled off with the neighbors on the tar-paper roof of their building. The adults laughed, told stories, and played cards. Children got to stay up late if they promised to lie quietly on a mattress. The lights of the George Washington Bridge especially dazzled Faith. She always felt that the arched pathway across the heavens was hers. She wore it in her dreams as a giant diamond necklace and flew above it in her imagination. She would later write a children’s book about her memories of the bridge and the roof she called Tar Beach. Through her art, Faith would send a message that people are free to go wherever they wish.

Can you see where Faith is flying? Can you see where the story is written? Each of those words is written by hand.

4. Dancing at the Louvre, 1991, from “The French Collection; Part I” series, acrylic on canvas, pieced fabric borders, 73 ½”x 80”

In 1991, Ringgold traveled to Paris to begin working on a series of story quilts called the French Collection which tell the adventures of an African-American woman named Willia Marie Simone, who was born in Faith’s imagination. She does things Ringgold never did but would like to have done – such as study art for a year by herself in Paris. The story starts in 1920, when sixteen year old Willia leaves Harlem to become an artist in Paris. She eventually becomes a world-famous painter and enjoys being among the inner circles of Parisian artists.

In “Dancing at the Louvre”, Willia helps her friend Marcia take her three daughters to visit the Louvre, a historic museum in Paris. Her children dance in front of the familiar painting the “Mona Lisa”, by Leonardo da Vinci. By posing the children as dancers beneath the “Mona Lisa”, Ringgold revealed her feelings about

European art. Traditionally African-Americans and women were not included among the inner circles of European artists, so Ringgold depicted the figures in this piece observing European art with interest but also with lightheartedness. As models for this story quilt, Ringgold used photographs of her own family. Willia Marie resembles Ringgold's mother as a young woman. In fact, Willia's personality was inspired by Ringgold's memories of Willi.

How does this quilt make you feel?

5. The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles, 1991, from "The French Collection: Part I" series, acrylic on canvas, pieced fabric, 74"x80"

This quilt tells the story of Willia at a meeting of an imaginary group called the National Sunflower Quilters Society of America. African-American women who changed history work on a quilt of sunflowers. Standing in the sunflower field is Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh, who painted many still life images of sunflowers during his lifetime. When the sun goes down, the women finish piecing their quilt. The story reads that van Gogh "just settled inside himself, and took on the look of the sunflowers in the field as if he were one of them." In this way, Ringgold contrasts the way that some men traditionally have created art – alone with their paints – with the method of women quilters, who work as a team.

What do you think happens when people get together to make a quilt? For example they might talk, help each other out, or learn new techniques. There is a quilt of sunflowers in a sunflower field. How do we distinguish the difference?

Ringgold now enjoys a new studio and home in Englewood, New Jersey, which is across the George Washington Bridge from Harlem. Reflecting upon a time long ago when she was even too young to sew with a machine, she said with a smile, "I still love that bridge."

Now it is your turn!

You are going to do a story quilt with a flying self portrait.