

# Faith Ringgold

Please bring to the classroom with you:

- “Tar Beach” book

The Art in the Classroom folder for this artist contains a biography, an interview with the artist and more detailed information on her life and work.

The artist's website [www.faithringgold.com](http://www.faithringgold.com) was a great source for this write up. Other sources were Faith Ringgold: A Study Guide for Teachers, Elizabeth Ament, PHD, Shorewood Fine Art Reproductions; Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilt: Dancing at the Louvre, Dan Cameron, University of California Press.

*“I am inspired by people who rise above their adversity. That’s my deepest inspiration. And I’m also inspired by the fact that if I really, really want to, I think I can do anything.” ...Faith Ringold*

## Summary Page

Faith Ringgold  
(1930- )

- Born and raised in Harlem, NYC.
- Mother was a seamstress and designed clothes.
- Sick with Asthma as a child and became very close with her mother.
- Broke with conventions by attending college and graduating from City College.
- Worked as an art teacher in NYC public schools.
- Developed her own style of art in the story quilt. She used her life experiences to tell stories expressing her ideas. Works are painted on canvas and then “framed” with fabric quilting. Because her mother was so involved with sewing and designing, Faith was always surrounded with fabrics and this technique was almost a natural progression for her.
- Went to France and was influenced by art she saw there.
- She started the French Collection series of story quilts.
- She is married and has 2 daughters and 3 granddaughters.
- The story quilt “Tar Beach” was made into her first children’s book.
- She is currently a professor of art at University of California in San Diego, California.

# Faith Ringgold Presentation

Take a few minutes and ask the children if they remember some important points from the last Art in the Classroom presentation. Review the elements of art, briefly.

When we look at the artwork I am showing you today, let's refer to these tools that an artist uses.

(Elements of art page – Color, shape, line, light, color, texture, space)

*Slide 1*

Remind them that appreciating art starts with being good observers.

I am going to tell you a story about the artist that we are going to talk about today. That makes sense, because she tells stories through her art. Faith Ringgold grew up in Harlem in New York City about 50 years ago. Her family did not have a lot of money. All of you in this room are probably planning to go to college after high school. It was not the same for Faith. When she was growing up, not many African American women went to college. She had to work very hard to get the opportunity to go. Somehow, she managed to get into art school. How great! One of her teachers gives her an assignment – paint a picture of mountains. Well, Faith was born and raised in New York City. She had never even seen mountains! She worked hard on it, though, and with great expectations she handed it in to her teacher. Now imagine her teacher looking at her work and telling her “You can not draw, you will not be an artist”. Wow! Aren't we lucky to have teachers that encourage you here at Burr? What would you do if you were Faith? How would you feel? Well, Faith took it as a challenge. “I'll show him!” she thought. She worked even harder to reach her goal of becoming an artist.

When Faith began her career, like any artist, she had to work to get her art seen by people. It is hard to get your art shown in art galleries. Faith found that there were colleges and some galleries around the country that were willing to display her work. She would have to ship her artwork all over the country.

What would be some problems with shipping framed artwork? *Heavy and cumbersome pieces; expensive, delicate work could get damaged.* Faith remembered seeing an art form called "Tankas" (pronounced *thangka*). A tanka is a portable religious painting on cloth. It is like a fabric wall hanging. Here is one tanka from Tibet, made hundreds of years ago and one that is modern made.



Slide 2

Faith was very close with her mother when she was growing up. Her mother was a seamstress and she taught Faith how to sew. Faith thought that she could put her art on fabric or cloth and use the sewing skills that her mother taught her to quilt the fabric. She made "frames" from pieces of fabric, sewn together. She would be able to send her art across the country now, easily and rather cheaply.



Slide 3

*Church Picnic*, 1988

Acrylic on canvas, fabric border

74 x 69 "

The High Museum of Art, Atlanta

African Americans have rich traditions. One of these traditions is storytelling. Faith used her artwork to tell stories. She wrote the words of the story on the borders. Let's look at this piece. It is titled "Church Picnic".

**Can anyone see the different kinds of fabric that frame the painting?  
Look at the painting and give me some ideas of what you think is going on. What are some of the clues?**

**What is the mood of this painting?**

**What's the most important thing, the focal point, in this painting?** *The couple*

**How does the artist let us know what is important?** *The couple is at the center of the work, the other figures are looking at them.*

**Do you think that the people are having a good time? Why or why not?**

**Can you see the story written out on the artwork?**

The following is a paraphrased version of the story of the Church Picnic Quilt.

Interesting note: **What does Faith use to write the text on her quilts?** A sharpie marker!

The story:

The minister and a pretty young woman in the center of the picture are obviously in love with each other. The other members of the congregation look on with approval or amusement. The storyteller is the older woman sitting in the upper right hand corner with her young son at her side. *Does everyone see which person I am talking about?* After arriving home, she tells the events of the afternoon to her daughter, who never showed up at the picnic and who the story teller thinks is in the next room. *Why do you think that the storyteller's daughter was not at the picnic? Can anyone think of a possible reason?* Let's go on and find out why.

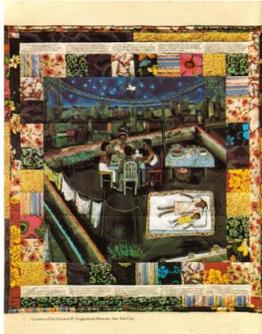
The storyteller continues to tell the story of the picnic and the budding romance; until she realizes that her daughter, to whom she thinks is talking, is not even home. In fact, the daughter had not gone to the picnic because she, too, is in love with the minister and could not bear to see him in love with somebody else. We are left to wonder how the mother will deal with her daughter's situation.

**Do you think that the story would be different if it was told by the minister?**

**Faith Ringgold has a genuine sense of hope. When looking at the Church Picnic, for what do you think the people are hopeful – for example, the minister? ...the woman telling the story? ...the storyteller's daughter?**

**Does Faith give us a solution to this problem?** No! This story is called a dilemma tale and there is no solution. This is a common type of story in African-American storytelling and Faith uses it in her work. This is an example of another way she takes something from her background and uses it in her artwork.

## Tar Beach



Slide 4

*Tar Beach*, 1988

Acrylic on canvas, tie-dyed, pieced fabric border

74 x 69"

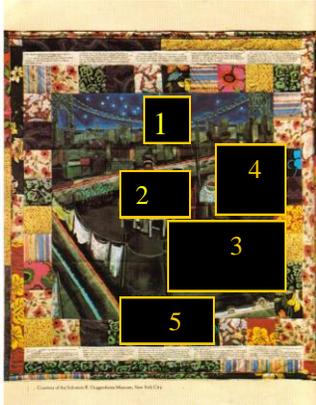
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

This type of art is called a story quilt. Does anybody recognize this one? The students may have seen the popular children's book called "Tar Beach".

This piece is called Tar Beach. It was so well liked, that this story quilt was made into a children's book of the same name. Faith remembers going up to the roof on hot summer nights with her parents, her parents' friends and her little brother when she was young while the grown ups played cards. The surface of the roof was tar. She would imagine herself flying over different areas in New York and she imagined that whatever she flew over would be hers, even the George Washington Bridge!

I want you all to look at the painting very carefully. Give them a minute of silence to observe. We are going to play a game.

Note to parent: Five areas of the picture have been obscured. The children should try to remember what is behind each "box". One by one, each area will be revealed.



Slide 5

This story quilt is belongs to the Guggenheim Museum in New York. We are going to imagine that there was a terrible accident at the museum and the quilt has been damaged. It is our job to restore the painting to its original form. Will you help me?

**Who can tell me what is missing from Box #1?**

A girl flying over the bridge. Who could that girl be?

**Box #1 revealed:**

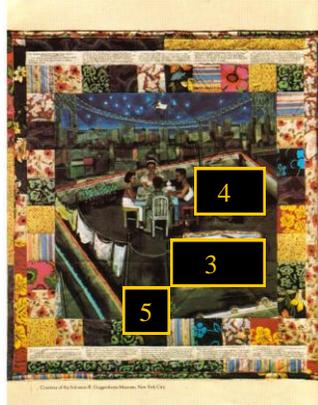


Slide 6

**Who remembers what is behind Box 2?**

How many people? how many men? how many women? How are they dressed? What are they doing? Who could they be?

**Box #2 revealed:**

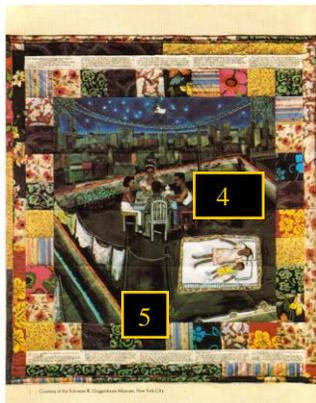


Slide 7

**Who remembers what is behind Box #3**

Who are the figures? *Faith and her little brother.*

**Box #3 revealed:**

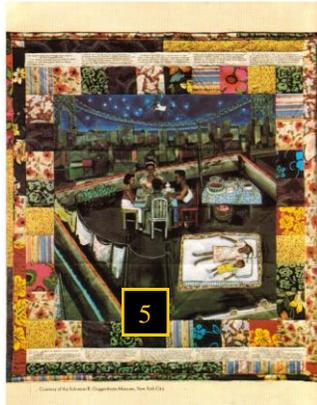


Slide 8

### Who can tell me what is behind Box #4?

What is on the table? Is there anything under the table?

### Box #4 revealed:



Slide 9

There is only one more correction that we need to do before the painting is fully restored. **Can anyone tell me what is behind Box #5?** Take their answers. Go to the next image to see if they are right.

### Box #5 revealed:



Slide 10

Why do you think that this plant is there? Does it help tell the story? Do the plants give the scene a warmer, more "homey" feeling? Let's think about the Elements of Art. Let's think about how she is using the space of her canvas, how she might want to compose the picture. Do you think that she used this here to complete her composition? How would the painting look if the plant was not there? It might look out of balance.

Thank you for helping restore Tar Beach! Now that you are so familiar with it, let me ask you some questions.

**What is happening in this story?**

**Do you think that these people are wealthy? Do you think that these people are happy to be together?**

**Why would people use their rooftop instead of a sand beach or a park?**

**What is on the clothesline? Is there a breeze out this night?**

**Do the figures in this painting look realistic, like a photograph?** *No. They look flat.*

Faith said **“when you paint flat, you get more contrast in the colors, and you can use purer coloring...I know that children like bright colors, and I like them, too. So, I’m trying to communicate with children.”**

**Do you think that the colors appear brighter because the figures aren’t rounded or shaded?**

**What kind of textures do you see? How might the tar of the roof feel on a hot night? How about the quilt on which the children are lying?**

**What do you see in the background? What kind of lines does the bridge form?** *Graceful, curved lines*

## Dancing at the Louvre



Slide 11

*Dancing at the Louvre*, 1991

Acrylic on canvas, tie-dyed, pieced fabric border  
73.5 x 80"

From the Series: The French Collection Part I; #1  
Private Collection

The woman in the yellow dress is named Willia. She is visiting her friend Marcia (in the blue dress). Marcia is an American that has moved to France and loves all things French. The little girls are Marcia's children. The scene is a famous museum in Paris, France – the Louvre.

**What is the mood of the painting? Is it joyous, serious, funny, realistic?  
Why do you think that?**

**Does anything look familiar to you?** (the children should recognize the Mona Lisa). The Mona Lisa is one of the most famous examples of traditional painting. People think of the Mona Lisa as important and serious. Thousands go to Paris to see this painting.

**Why do you think the artist chose to use the Mona Lisa in this painting?**

*Sometimes people take art too seriously. Sometimes people forget that there is pure joy in art, all kinds of art. The children are expressing their joy at seeing the Mona Lisa.*

**What do you think the Mona Lisa would say if she could see Marcia and her children dancing at the Louvre?**

Now we are going to play another little game to see what kind of observers you are.

Oh no, there has been another accident. There are some parts that are missing from this painting. We need to use our skills as art detectives to restore the painting.



Slide 12

**Who remembers the other paintings that hang on either side of the Mona Lisa?**

**What is the subject matter?** – *Mothers and children*. That is also the main subject of Faith's painting as well. Let's see if you are right!



Slide 13

**How are the children in the paintings different than Marcia's children? How do they contrast with Marcia's children?** *They are more sedate, quiet, "perfect", idealized.*

The Mona Lisa is known for her mysterious smile. Compare her expression with Willia's (the woman in the yellow dress). What could Willia be thinking?

## The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles

Quilt making is an art form developed by women from many cultures where scraps of material are sewn together to make a blanket. Traditionally, quilts have been made by groups of women who gather together, this is called a quilting bee.



Slide 14

*The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles, 1991*  
Acrylic on canvas, tie-dyed, pieced fabric border  
74 x 80"  
From the Series: The French Collection Part I; #4  
Private Collection

Faith gathered together African American women that she admired and put them together for this quilting bee. These women were important to Faith because they all stood up for freedom.

One of them is Rosa Parks. **Do you know what Rosa Parks did that made her famous?** *She would not move to the back of the bus at a time when African Americans were expected to give up their seats on the bus for white people. She refused. She took a stand for freedom and equality.*

Another figure is Harriet Tubman. **Does anyone know anything about Harriet Tubman and why she is famous?** *She was a slave that escaped to freedom and organized an "underground railroad" to help other slaves escape, too.*

**What are the women doing? Piecing together a quilt. What could Faith be saying by having these women working on a quilt?** *Maybe she is piecing together people that have different ideas and backgrounds, maybe they are piecing together freedom for everyone.*

**Do you see anyone you recognize in this story quilt?** *van Gogh. Vincent van Gogh has painted a famous still life "The Sunflowers".* **Do you see sunflowers in this painting? Where are they? Do you think that Faith chose that flower for a reason?** *Make a connection with van Gogh and the quilters.*

**What could the quilters "piece up" now? Where are there problems in the world?** *Faith is hoping for peace.*

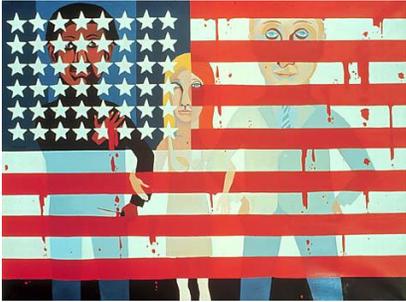
**If you were going to gather together people you admire, whom would you invite? Where would you go together? What would you be doing?**

**Is there anything that van Gogh has in common with the quilters?** *He was a suffering, artist, somewhat alone. His work was not appreciated when he was alive.*

Vincent van Gogh was a famous Impressionist painter. Impressionists' use quick, short brushstrokes. What part of the painting looks like it was done in the van Gogh style? The flowers in the background.

Find the part of the painting that looks like quilting. The quilt on which the women are working appears to have quilted seams.

## The Flag is Bleeding



Slide 15

*The American People Series #18: The Flag is Bleeding, 1967*

Oil on canvas

72 x 96"

Collection of the Artist

From the Series: American People

This painting shows the unrest in our country in the 1960's. Martin Luther King was famous for working for all of us to be treated as equals. In 1968 he was killed. Faith Ringgold is using this painting as a way to express what she is feeling about this event.

**Describe what you see in this painting.**

**Why do you think that the figures are holding arms?** *Maybe a sign of hope that one day we will all get along.*

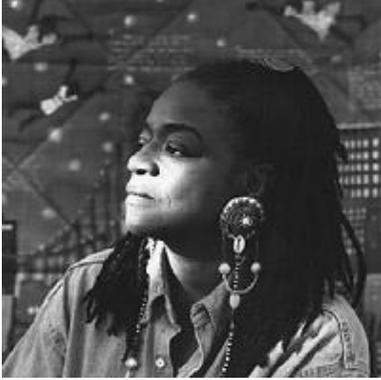
**Why do you think she called this painting "The Flag is Bleeding?"**

**Can you tell that the flag is translucent, see-through? Why?**

**Why do you think that Faith uses the flag in front of the subjects, instead of as a background?**

**How is this work different than the others that we have seen today?** *Large, central figures; not quilted, no fabric frame.*

This work was done 40 years ago. Many of Faith's paintings are owned by museums and collectors. Faith has not sold nor has she given away this painting. **Do you think that "The Flag is Bleeding" might have a special meaning for her? If so, what might it be?** *Maybe because she is an African American woman that has had to overcome prejudices in her life.*



Slide 16

**Well, do you all agree with Faith's art school teacher who told her that she would never be an artist?**

**What can we learn from Faith?**

Some ideas: Keep trying! Your heritage and family shape who you are. We all should get along! Do not be afraid to hope, ...

There is the children's book *Tar Beach* available to you. You can read it if you have time or alternatively, you can flip through it and show them some of the paintings Faith made to illustrate the story.

Today in Art in the Classroom we discussed  
the artist Faith Ringgold.

She is an **African American** woman that grew up in **New York City**. She uses paint and **fabric** on a large canvas to create a **story quilt**. Her story quilt "**Tar Beach**" was published as a children's book. The George Washington **Bridge** figures prominently in her work. Another work we looked at is titled "**Church Picnic**". The story is a dilemma tale, this technique is in keeping with an African –American storytelling tradition. In all of **Faith** Ringgold's work there is a theme of **hope** and **freedom**.



Can you find the words in **bold** in the Word Search above?