

Young Portrait Explorers: Faith Ringgold



Learning Objective: Learn about how Faith Ringgold uses quilts to tell stories.

Portrait Discussion:

Spend 30 seconds letting your eyes wander from the top of the quilt to the bottom.

Style: This kind of art made from fabric is called a **textile**, but more specifically, it is a quilt because it has layers of material. Faith Ringgold made many quilts full of colors and patterns, especially around the **border**, or the area around the edges. Ringgold includes everyday fabric in her quilts, like those you might see in a quilt in your house, because she wants them to feel familiar. What colors and patterns do you see? Does Ringgold's art look like anything in your home?

Self-Portrait: Faith Ringgold's quilt is **autobiographical** (it tells her life's story). Each square contains a memory. Discover stories from Ringgold's life by observing the quilt squares, moving from left to right, top to bottom. Ringgold was born in New York City. *How does she depict her mother? Notice the way her mother holds her. As a child, Ringgold was a very sick. Art became her comfort. What did she create? Why is this memory important?* Her teacher told a story about George Washington feeding African American boys during the Revolutionary War, but Ringgold reimagined it to include Black and white children sitting together. *How does Ringgold's drawing change the story?*

Ringgold was inspired by art from Asia, Africa, and Europe, and traveled to learn from artists around the world. *What does the large colorful figure in the left middle square have in common with her artwork? Do you see similar colors or shapes in the rest of the quilt?*

Ringgold created quilts showing people flying. She said, "Anyone can fly! All you need is somewhere to go that you can't get to any other way." *What might flying symbolize? Where would you go if you could fly?*

Ringgold's first book, *Tar Beach*, was about a little girl named Cassie who felt trapped in New York City, until she imagined herself flying to exciting places. *Do you ever feel trapped? What makes you feel free?*

She also created a group of **mosaics** (pictures made from small pieces of stone or glass) for a New York City Subway system called "Flying Home: Harlem Heroes and Heroines." *What does the title mean to you? At the bottom left, her quilt shows a mosaic of performers Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson. Who are your heroes?* Ringgold and her daughters visited museums in Paris. *How do they feel about art? How does art make you feel?* Her husband, Burdette, supported her art. *How does she depict their life together? Why is there a house? What place or object would you use to symbolize your family?*

Historical Context: Faith Ringgold has spent the last 70 years creating art (including paintings, sculptures, performance art, and quilts), teaching, and writing. She uses her art and voice to fight for racial and gender equality, and often uses flight as a metaphor for overcoming the challenges that she has encountered. In her self-portrait quilt, she references flight and a bridge, which symbolizes opportunity.

Related Children's Books:

Ringgold has written 17 books, including *Tar Beach*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9RKJleFdBu>

Activity: Self-Portrait Quilt

Materials:

Paper, scissors, glue, and coloring utensils

Colorful paper or fabric scraps

Instructions:

Think of memories that are important to you.

- Draw one square for each memory.
- Lay the squares together.
- Glue the pieces using your colorful paper or fabric to bind the squares into a quilt.



Self-Portrait by Faith Ringgold, hand-painted etching & pochoir borders on linen with quilted cotton border and nylon backing, 1998. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
 © Faith Ringold / Artists Rights Society (ARS)

Find the portrait on our website, here: https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2004.25

To zoom in on the squares of the quilt, visit this page:
https://iiif.si.edu/mirador/?manifest=https%3A%2F%2Fids.si.edu%2Fids%2Fmanifest%2FNPG-A400050B_1