

# INSPIRATIONS:

## Exploring the Art of Faith Ringgold

April 2 - September 19, 1993



The Textile Museum 2320 S Street, NW Washington, DC



*AUNT BESSIE, 1974, mixed media,  
65 x 40 x 12 ins. Collection of the artist  
Faith Ringgold.*

**T**he vibrant, often provocative and always engaging art of Faith Ringgold can be interpreted and appreciated on many levels. The works selected for this exhibition will be shown along with objects from The Textile Museum collections. From tie-dyed strip weaving from Cameroon and Kuba cloth from Zaire to Tibetan thangkas, ethnic textile traditions have had a profound influence on Ms. Ringgold's art. Didactic in nature, the intent of the exhibition is to educate as well as to entertain.

Born in Harlem in 1930, Faith Ringgold, painter, mixed-media sculptor, performance artist, and writer, lives and works in both La Jolla, California, and New York City. She is a Professor of Art at the University of California in San Diego, yet maintains her ties with her beloved Harlem.

Throughout her career, Faith Ringgold has been in the vanguard — in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's and the Women's Art Movement of the 1970's. In the 1980's and 90's, she began to make more personal, autobiographical statements in her art, while still retaining her political ideals. Inspired by her mother, Mme. Willi Posey Jones, a seamstress and fashion designer, Ms. Ringgold's work has evolved from conventional canvas paintings to painted quilts and soft sculpture. She has created her own genre — the painted story quilt, in which the aural medium of storytelling is translated into visual form. Her quilts are visual diaries which allowed her to tell historical and autobiographical stories uniquely seasoned with her own Black Feminist fantasies.

In the early 1960's, Ringgold decided that she wanted to find a way to create images of Black people that were acceptable to her. Her experience in college had given her a great deal of technical information. However, most of what she learned in

school was from a European perspective. She went through a period of looking at African art for some of the answers she was seeking. She also travelled to Europe to experience first hand the works of art she had studied in school. This episode helped to solidify her determination to be an artist. She then set up her studio in her dining room and started painting.

She painted in a hard-edged style, with flat surfaces. Her forms were simplified in a style reminiscent of a combination of African art and Cubism. The mask-faced figures are iconic in their representation, accentuated with black outlines. In addition, her 60's paintings were very much influenced by the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. Her penchant for rhythmic design and the use of bold flat color which began to emerge in this period was inspired by her love of African textiles and sculpture.

The decorative works of the Kuba people of Zaire were an important aspect of the African "classical" art form that influenced and inspired Ringgold. She attributes the African symbolism in her work to the Kuba design system which consists of eight triangles in a rectangle which she uses again and again, in endless variations in her quilts and as backdrops for her soft sculptures and masks.

The 1970's marked a period of transition in Ringgold's work with the creation of her "thangka" series, created in collaboration with her mother. Inspired by an exhibition of Tibetan thangkas (painted religious hangings framed with pieces of fabric) she had seen in Amsterdam, Ringgold adapted the thangka format because it was functional and practical, as well as non-European and beautiful. Her mother designed and constructed the cloth borders for her paintings which allowed Ringgold to roll and store or ship her works easily and relatively inexpensively.



Her first series of soft sculptures and masks in the 70's depict individuals and couples representative of the Black community (*Zora*, 1975 and *Fish*, 1975) and members of her extended family (*Aunt Edith*, 1974 and *Aunt Bessie*, 1974). The soft sculptures were often exhibited with the thangkas and were incorporated into performance pieces inspired by African ritual ceremonies where masks and sculpture are worn or carried in "multi-media" productions that include music, dance and drama. Ringgold's performances focussed on issues of particular concern and relevance to the African-American community.

*WOMEN'S LIBERATION TALKING MASK, 1973, mixed media, 59 x 29 1/2 ins. Collection of the artist Faith Ringgold.*

"Mother's Quilt" (1983) is made from pieces of fabric her mother had cut out to make dresses for a doll quilt Ringgold was planning. Ringgold used the cut pieces in this textile which pays tribute to her mother, who died before the quilt could be completed.

The *Baby Faith and Willi series* (1982) was developed during an emotional and stressful period in the artist's life. Her mother, Willi Posey, died and her first grandchild Baby Faith was born. The creation of this series was therapeutic for Ringgold and began a healing process. These abstract paintings were also influenced by her knowledge of African Kuba designs and the rhythms of Bakuba masks.

Her first story quilt, "Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima" (1982) allowed the storyteller to emerge. She found that she was able to relate her fantasies as well as make political commentary about the "most maligned Black female stereotype" through the medium of the quilt. Her story transforms Aunt Jemima into a heroine, Jemima Blakey, a successful, elegant business woman, while combining the elements of folklore and fable in traditional Black dialect. Ringgold says of her story quilts:

*"In making quilts I am able to communicate ideas I would not be able to communicate in any other way. They are a platform for mixing art and ideas so that neither suffers."*

*Tar Beach II* (1990) which is included in this exhibition, is one of an edition of silk screen printed story quilts Ms. Ringgold completed at the Fabric Workshop, an experimental textile design studio in Philadelphia. Based on her popular painted quilt *Tar Beach* (1988) and her award-winning children's book of the same name, about a little girl living in Harlem named

Cassie Louise Lightfoot, the moral of the story is "anyone can fly!"

Ringgold's brilliant career is exemplified by her commitment to making an art that speaks to her own and her people's experiences—their struggles, their triumphs and their histories. As artist, feminist, activist, Ringgold has been celebrated by her fellow artists. Poet Amiri Baraka calls hers an authentic voice which "announces the news of the field." She has vindicated her forbearers whom Alice Walker refers to in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* where she asks, "What did it mean for a Black woman to be an artist in our grandmother's time? In our great-grandmother's day?...the vibrant, creative spirit that the Black woman has inherited...pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day." In her book of essays, *Yearnings*, Bell Hooks writes a piece that is inspired by the work of Faith Ringgold. She says that Ringgold "has always cherished and celebrated the artistic work of unknown and unheralded Black women. Evoking this legacy in her work, she calls us to remember, to celebrate, to give praise."

Faith Ringgold's sophistication, her genius, her boldness and her skill all come together in her creations. She is prolific and dedicated and has made a place for herself in the history of American art. She has met her own challenge when she says, "Anyone can fly, all you need is somewhere to go that you can't get to in any other way."

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Guest Curator

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*Cover: TAR BEACH II, Faith Ringgold, 1990, silkscreened quilt, 66 x 66 ins. Collection of the artist Faith Ringgold.*