

FAITH RINGGOLD



*No. Curator
Love from
Faith
3/25/94*

THE SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

"I have a responsibility to myself and to coming generations of artists. I would like to be the one who helps them do what they want to do. That's the point of being an artist. You can communicate things that you feel and see. You are a voice. You have a power to do that. You don't have to ask for anybody's permission. You don't need anyone's help. Once art is made, it can be seen. That is a very powerful thing."

Faith Ringgold is an accomplished, outspoken, and dynamic artist, writer, and performer. She has worked in a variety of techniques and media, ranging from stretched painted canvas, soft sculpture, and serigraphs to an art form she calls the "story quilt." Her most recent series of story quilts, *French Collection I and II* (1991-94), as well as other pivotal pieces that have contributed to the creation of the series, are the focus of this exhibition.

The artist's combined use of acrylic paint and various textiles provides a lush composite of African and European designs, textures, and patterns. She decided early in her painting career to merge African and Euro-American aesthetics in an artistic synthesis that reflects the African-American experience. Intense color and complementary hues enhance the emotional intensity of her work. Combinations of red and green, violet, yellow, brown, and gold all work toward a particular mood or ambience that complements the quilt's story. Color fields dominate each work and give them a visual cohesiveness. *Tar Beach 2*, 1990 features a solid blue color field, as does *Wedding on the Seine*, 1991. After beginning with a strong colored background such as yellow, deep red, or blue-gray, Ringgold then builds up layers of color to give the work a brilliant richness and luminosity.

Ringgold's themes include the African slave trade, the resulting plight of African-Americans in the United States and Europe, and the central role of the family in African-American survival. She has illustrated these themes in the context of the lives of many famous African-American characters, popular song lyrics, current world events, and life in Harlem.

Two of the major themes represented in this series are the artist's close association with her family, and the challenge faced by African-American female artists in fulfilling the roles of both mother and professional artist. These themes come together in *Mother's Quilt*, 1983, which pays tribute to the artist's mother and earlier ancestors who passed on their skills, courage, and wisdom to Ringgold's generation. The artist was extremely close to her mother, Mem. Willi Posey, who was an accomplished fashion designer and dressmaker. They collaborated on the early tanka-framed paintings, the first story quilt, and the soft sculpture pieces. This working relationship continued till Mem. Posey's death in 1981. *Mother's Quilt* was made from pieces of fabric previously prepared by Mem. Posey for a doll quilt project. Ringgold added beads and yarn for a three-dimensional effect. This piece marks a new era in the artist's career, as this was the first quilted work to be constructed solely by the artist.

For her story quilts Ringgold has drawn on the tanka design, which is based on the fabric frames found on Tibetan religious hangings. This has become the standard framing device for all of her quilted works. Previously, Ringgold had painted on large unwieldy stretched canvases, but with tanka framing and quilting techniques, she could roll up the works and transport them easily. The quilting techniques - learned from her mother - make specific reference to traditional notions of "women's work." They also introduce a component of African and African-American textile traditions.

Other African-inspired elements are evident in the artist's compositions: the Kuba square made of four triangles, the West African practice of portraying humans with enlarged heads, and the inclusion of tie-dyed materials. *Subway Graffiti 2*, 1989, includes several of these elements. The border of the painting is composed of narrow strips of dyed material arranged in a pattern reminiscent of West African strip weaving. The figures in the crowd, who appear to be rhythmically moving like West African line dancers, have disproportionately large heads.

The story quilts incorporate a third element beyond the painted fabric and strip cloth borders: handwritten narratives which surround the images. Ringgold has said that she developed the story quilt to provide a venue for her stories, many of which describe a dilemma that neither the narrator nor the reader can solve. Dilemma stories can be traced back to many West African peoples, who used them to instruct the young by illustrating positive moral values and stimulating logical thought. Ringgold updates the form, often incorporating a feminist viewpoint. Art historian Thalia Gouma-Peterson has described these Modern Dilemma Tales as narratives which consider folklore, anecdote, and family legend in a contemporary setting but without making moral judgments.

Tar Beach 2, 1990, is a story quilt printed by the silk screen technique, a departure from Ringgold's painted canvases. It is based on both an earlier story quilt and on her own award-winning book, *Tar Beach*, published in 1988. The narrator of these stories is Cassie Louise Lightfoot, a little girl living in Harlem, who explains to the reader how "anyone can fly" and transcend difficult circumstances. The image of the tar beach came from Ringgold's childhood, when Harlem families would often spend summer evenings on the roofs of their homes, socializing with friends and neighbors.

The works in *French Collection I and II* illustrate Ringgold's engaging Modern Dilemma Tales. In each story motherhood clashes with a career in the arts. There is also a historical dimension to the series, in that it focuses on the careers of African-American expatriate artists who resided in France earlier in this century. For this series the artist created a fictional narrator named Willa Marie Simone. She is an African-American expatriate artist-model who challenges, while simultaneously immersing herself in, the European art world. Through the character of Willa Simone, the artist addresses issues of racism and sexism in the United States and Europe. Ringgold "reshapes history" by integrating the lives of black women artists with those of many



Tar Beach 2, 1990

famous European artists, and through this process gives us both a history lesson as well as a dilemma tale.

The paintings in the series neatly chronicle Willa Simone's rise to fame. *Wedding on the Seine* marks the heroine's first dilemma in which she marries a Frenchman and delays her career to begin a family. She questions her decision, her husband dies, and she is left with another problem: How can she, as a fledgling artist, raise two children with no means of financial support? *Picasso's Studio* supplies an answer to this question and explores the role of African art and culture in the development of cubism and Picasso's work. Simone pursues her artistic career and supplements her income by modeling for Matisse and Picasso. Ringgold portrays Simone posing for Picasso in front of his famous painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger*; along the walls of Picasso's studio are several African masks and

stacks of paintings. The African masks and the female figures in the painting discuss Simone's fate as an artist who must model to make a living. The masks suggest that she abandon her womanliness to succeed as an artist, while the female figures encourage her to pursue her goals without compromising her femininity.

On the Beach at St. Tropez portrays Simone after she has attained success as an artist and become a grandmother. The narrative for this piece revolves around the choice Simone made to remain an expatriate in France rather than raise her children. In a discussion with her son, she compares what might have happened if she had made her life in the United States to what she had attained by remaining in France. This conflict is also pursued in Ringgold's most recent painting, *Jo Baker's Birthday*. The work ponders not only issues about the expatriate experience

but also the role of motherhood in the life of a successful artist. Ringgold grapples with Josephine Baker's desire to have children as well as a career. Through the narration of Simone, the artist describes Baker's probable fate if she had remained a poor black woman in St. Louis, and contrasts this with the elegant life Baker lived in France. Ringgold portrays Josephine Baker in her home, resting as her French maid sets the table in the next room. The composition is derived from two paintings by Henri Matisse, *Odelisque with Magnolias* and *Composition in Red*. The result allows Ringgold to pay tribute to two artists whom she admires: Henri Matisse and Josephine Baker.

Ringgold's work is an important step in the continuing development of a strong African-American aesthetic that has come to the fore in the 1990s. She has successfully combined the Western linear aesthetic with a West African cyclic aesthetic which is found most often in contemporary Jazz music. She has inspired many of today's foremost African-American artists who are now combining photography with painting, quilting, and soft sculpture. Her positive and inspirational quilt narratives have proved to be so popular that they are now produced in a series of books and videos.

Jackie Lewis-Harris
Assistant Curator of the Arts of Africa,
Oceania, and the Americas

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Faith Ringgold for her patience, guidance, and wonderful conversations, and to Vanessa Williams, Ms. Ringgold's assistant, for her insights. Thanks to Dr. James D. Burke, Director of The Saint Louis Art Museum, for his support in this project; to Dr. Sidney Goldstein, Associate Director, and Charles Wylie, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art for their advice; to Jennifer Crets, Administrative Assistant, and Marge Getty, Volunteer.
J.L.-H.

Currents 57: Faith Ringgold is supported in part by a grant from the Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles.

Works in the Exhibition

With the exception of *Jo Baker's Birthday*, all works are in the collection of the artist.

Jo Baker's Birthday, 1993

acrylic on canvas; tie-dyed, printed and pieced fabrics; 72 x 72 inches

The Saint Louis Art Museum Purchase; Minority Artists Purchase Fund, and funds given in honor of Cuesta Benberry, 10:1994

Picasso's Studio, 1991

acrylic on canvas; tie-dyed, printed, and pieced fabrics; 73 x 68 inches

On the Beach at St. Tropez, 1991

acrylic on canvas; tie-dyed, printed, and pieced fabrics; 74 x 92 inches

Wedding on the Seine, 1991

acrylic on canvas; tie-dyed, printed, and pieced fabrics; 74 x 89 1/2 inches

Tar Beach 2, 1990

silk screen with pieced fabrics; 70 x 70 inches

Subway Graffiti 2, 1987

acrylic on canvas; tie-dyed, printed, and pieced fabrics; 60 x 84 inches

Mother's Quilt, 1983

Printed, beaded, pieced and appliqued fabrics; 58 x 43 1/2 inches

Biography

1930 Born in Harlem, New York

1955 B.S., City College of New York

1959 M.A., City College of New York

The artist lives and works in Englewood, New Jersey, and teaches in the Visual Arts Department of the University of California, San Diego.

Selected Awards

1992 Coretta Scott King Award and Caldecott Honor Book Award for *Tar Beach*

1991 The Studio Museum in Harlem, Honors the Artist of the Year

1990 The La Napoule Foundation Award

1989 National Endowment for the Arts Award

1988 New York Foundation for the Arts Award

1987 The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship

1983 Wonder Woman Award, Warner Communications, New York

1978 National Endowment for the Arts Award

1976 The American Association of University Women for travel to Africa

1971 Creative Artists Public Service Award

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

1990 Faith Ringgold: A Twenty-Five Year Survey, Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, Hempstead, New York (catalogue).

1989 Faith Ringgold, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle.

1987 Faith Ringgold: Painted Story Quilts, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland.

1985 Faith Ringgold: Painting, Sculpture & Performance, College of Wooster Art Museum, Wooster, Ohio (catalogue).



Mother's Quilt, 1983

- 1984 Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture and Performance (1963-1984), The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (catalogue)
- 1983 Faith Ringgold: Black and Feminist Art, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.
- 1982 Soft Sculpture, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio.
- 1980 Faith Ringgold: Soft Sculpture, Museum of African and African-American Art, Buffalo, New York (catalogue).
- 1979 Woman on a Pedestal, series, Texas Technical University, Lubbock, Texas.
- Faith Ringgold: Paintings from the Sixties, Summit Gallery, New York.
- 1978 Harlem '78, Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia.
- 1975 Paintings, Sculpture and Masks, Southeastern Missouri State College, Springfield.
- 1970 America Black, Spectrum Gallery, New York.
- 1967 American People, Spectrum Gallery, New York.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1992 Outspoken and Handcrafted, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
- 1991 Great American Quilt Show, Museum of American Folk Art, New York.
- 1990 Prophets and Translators: Black Artists in Transition, The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia.
- 1989 Randolph Street 10th Anniversary Invitational Art Auction, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago.
- Quilting Partners, Arte em Retalhos, Sao Paulo, Brazil, Musée de Arts de Sao Paulo Assis Chateaubriand.
- 1988 Committed to Print, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1987 The Art of Black America in Japan; Afro-American Modernism: 1937-1987, The Terada Warehouse, Tokyo, Japan.

- 1986 Poetry of the Physical, American Craft Museum, New York (catalogue).
- 1985 Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade 1963-1973, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. American Women in Art, United Nations International Conference on Women, Nairobi, Kenya (catalogue). Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (catalogue).
- 1981 The Prison Show, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
- 1980 Africa in the Americas, Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 1978 Dolls, Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Museum, Washington, D.C.
- 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, Festac '77, Lagos, Nigeria.
- 1972 Documenta IV, Kassel, Germany.
- 1971 Taking Care of Business, The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston, and other venues (catalogue).
- 1968 Memorial Exhibit for Martin Luther King, Jr., Museum of Modern Art, New York (catalogue).

Selected Bibliography

- Potter, Crown and Clarkson. *Paris Connections: African Americans in Paris*. New York: Random House/Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.
- Through Sisters' Eyes*. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C., 1992.
- Visions. *The Art of the Quilt*. C&T Publishing: Lafayette, California, 1992 (back cover).
- Witzling, Mara R., ed. "Voicing Our Visions, Writings by Women Artists." Universe: New York, 1991, pp. 10, 11, 339, 351-367.
- Sills, Leslie. *Inspirations: Stories about Women Artists, Frida Kahlo, Alice Neel, Georgia O'Keeffe, Faith Ringgold*. Albert Whitman & Co.: Niles, Illinois, 1988.
- Roth, Moira and Thalia Gouma-Peterson. *Faith Ringgold, Change: Painted Story Quilts*. Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York, 1987.
- Gouma-Peterson, Thalia and Kathleen McManus Zurko. *Faith Ringgold: Painting, Sculpture, and Performance*. College of Wooster Art Museum, Wooster, Ohio, 1984.
- Faith Ringgold: Soft Sculpture*. Museum of African American Art, Buffalo, New York, 1980.
- Gaither, Edmund Barry. *Jubilee: Afro-American Artists on Afro-America*. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, November 14, 1975.
- Faith Ringgold: Black Women Artists 1963-1973*. University Art Gallery, Voorhees Hall, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1973.
- Gemeinschaft, Gedok. *American Women Artist Show*. der Kunstlerinnen und Kunstfreunde Hamburg, Kunsthaus, Hamburg, Germany, April 14, 1972.

Cover: *Jo Baker's Birthday*, 1993