

# Faith Ringgold

## Paints Crown Heights

Time: 15 minutes

## Study Guide

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### INTRODUCTION

**Faith Ringgold Paints Crown Heights** is a film about an important work by the famous African-American woman artist that sends a message about bringing together cultures and community. Faith Ringgold was commissioned to create a children's history story quilt in 1994 for Public School 22 in response to fighting and killings between groups of people in the Crown Heights area of Brooklyn, New York. Students will see how she develops a concept for the artwork, researches the background of each culture, chooses folk stories to depict and organizes the composition of the quilt with 12 squares - one for each of the main cultures in Crown Heights. She shares her inspiring philosophy of overcoming obstacles by doing creative, imaginative, exciting, hard work, just as she did in **Faith Ringgold, The Last Story Quilt**. Students will watch her painting each square on canvas and see how she "frames" her work with quilted fabric to present her unique vision of the world.

### TO THE TEACHER:

This video is appropriate for students from upper elementary (Grade 3) to adult learners. However, the student guide is targeted for Grades 3 - 8. The objectives of the guide are to:

- stimulate active viewing that engages students' minds;
- provide questions for reflection;
- suggest experiential activities that involve many areas of the curriculum.

The intent is to give students an opportunity to interpret the artist's work, understand the social and historical context of the artist's life and to make connections to their own lives and learning.

### SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTIST

You may want to begin by sharing some information about the artist and her accomplishments with the students. Adapt the language to the appropriate age level of the class. Students may recognize the artist through her successful books, like Tar Beach and Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad Through the Sky.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Faith Ringgold began her artistic career more than 35 years ago as a painter. Today, she is best known for her painted story quilts - art that combines painting, quilted fabric and storytelling. She has exhibited in major museums in the United States, Europe, South America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. She is in the permanent collection of many museums, including the Studio Museum of Harlem, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Museum of Modern Art. In addition, her works are in private collections and shown in galleries like the ACA Gallery in New York.

She has received more than 75 awards, fellowships, citations and honors, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Fellowship for painting, two National Endowment for the Arts Awards and 11 honorary doctorates, one of which is from her alma mater, City College of New York. She taught art in the New York City public schools for over 18 years. Today she is a senior professor of art at the University of California in San Diego.

Her first book, *Tar Beach*, was a Caldecott Honor Book and winner of the Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration, among numerous other honors. She has written and illustrated five other children's books: *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*, *Dinner at Aunt Connie's house*, *Bonjour Lonnie*, *My Dream of Martin Luther King* and *The Invisible Princess*.

Books about Faith Ringgold include: *We Flew Over the Bridge*, *The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* by the artist and *Talking to Faith Ringgold* by Faith Ringgold, Linda Freeman and Nancy Roucher. *The Last Story Quilt* is the subject of another video about Faith Ringgold created and produced by Linda Freeman.

For more information, visit the Faith Ringgold website at <http://www.artincontext.org/artist/ringgold/new.htm>.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR

*Help students actively view the video by giving them things to watch for and questions to think about, as appropriate for their age and grade level.*

- Watch to see how the blocks of color in the title change. Does this remind you of the artwork?
- Throughout the video you will see Faith Ringgold painting. Watch how the painting she is working on changes. Notice how she fills in figures and adds detail.
- Watch for scenes that show emigration of different people. How did most of them come to this country?
- Watch for the names of the different people who settled in Crown Heights: Jamaicans, Free West African, West African Slaves, Dutch Haitians, Algonquins, Mohawks, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Vietnamese, Korean. Can you identify which square they are on?
- Watch for how Faith Ringgold organizes the composition. and how she uses numbers and letters to work out the colors.
- Watch for how the artist prepares the canvas and uses acrylic paint like a "stain."
- Watch for how Faith Ringgold uses a grid, fits the fabric border and gives it to an assistant to sew the quilt.
- Watch for the artist's discussion of culture.

## QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

*Begin by reviewing selected items from **What to Watch For** as preparation for interpretative questions about Faith Ringgold and her work.*

- ❓ Why was Faith Ringgold asked to do the children's history story quilt?

? Who were the first people in America? Why are there so many different people in America?

? What symbol did emigrants see when they sailed into New York harbor? What does it mean?

? What is Faith Ringgold's work about? What idea does the Crown Heights quilt express? What does it mean?

? What is culture? How would you describe your own culture?

? Faith Ringgold says that being exposed to someone different doesn't make a person less. It makes them better. Do you agree? Why or why not?

? When Faith Ringgold says, "Beware of comfort, " what does she mean?

? Can you think of other incidents that have been caused by racism and hatred?

? How can a work of art help deal with hatred and conflict between groups?

? What can you learn from Faith Ringgold?

## **EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS**

*The following suggestions are designed to help students express ideas and interpretations about the meaning of Faith Ringgold's message and work to their own lives. Feel free to select from the curriculum applications that follow or adapt to meet the needs of your students and learning goals.*

1. Learn the technique of working with a grid. Take a reproduction of an existing artwork and divide it into a grid. Then re-create it using different media.

2. Experiment with different kinds of watercolor washes, such as wet on dry; wet on wet; mixing colors. When students have an interesting effect, ask them to use the wash as a background and make a drawing using markers to depict a historical event.
3. Find out about the cultures and stories represented on the Crown Heights Quilt. Work with a group to report on one of them to the class.
4. Research the different cultures in your community. How many are there? Where are they from? Where do they live? How are they keeping their culture alive? Create an exhibition, book, multi media presentation or web site to tell about the different cultures in your community.
5. Interview your parents, family or community members about your own background or culture. Why did your ancestors come to America? Find photos, news clippings, or archival records. Create a quilt square to tell about your own culture. The squares can be assembled into a class quilt.
6. Think of a conflict in your home, school, community, nation or world. What are the causes? What are the different points of view of the people involved? Create a graphic organizer to get a clear picture of what is happening. What could happen to help settle the conflict? Create a work of art that sends a message about the conflict and how it could be solved. Do sketches first, thinking of subject matter, objects, composition to express how you feel. Write a story on your work that will help communicate with the viewer.
7. Write a story about the Crown Heights Quilt, including the reason for the commission. Give your opinion about whether you think the work is "good."
8. Did the quilt help change things? Contact P.S. 22 and ask students, teachers and community members if relationships between the different cultures in Brooklyn have improved. Get their opinion about the reasons for this. Specifically ask what the reaction is to the quilt has been and if they think it has helped. Graph the results of the survey to present to the class.
9. On the quilt there are two squares about West African people; one is called *Free West Africans; The Negroes Speak of Rivers*; the other is

called *West African Slaves; We Wear the Mask*. Both are dated 1626. What is she trying to tell us in these two pictures? In the first square, Faith Ringgold bases her drawing on a poem by the famous African American writer Langston Hughes called *I've Known Rivers*. Find a copy of it to read and discuss what this says about this particular culture and its history.

10. How big is the quilt? Calculate the dimensions of the quilt using information from the video. How does it compare with a tablecloth, a quilt on the bed, a rug in terms of size? in terms of purpose?

## **VIDEO SERIES**

**Faith Ringgold Paints Crown Heights**, created and produced by Linda Freeman, is one of a series of videos that provide an intimate look at both the lives and work of famous African American artists. Art history is being made on film, as the artists create right before our eyes. These documentaries profile the personal relationships, joys and struggles of these extraordinary human beings - and give them the recognition they richly deserve. The goal of the series is to teach students about the art-making process and to inspire them to reach their own life goals.

For more information about *Faith Ringgold, The Last Story Quilt* and the other videos, contact Linda Freeman at L & S Productions, tel: 914-238-9366; fax: 914-238-6324.

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