

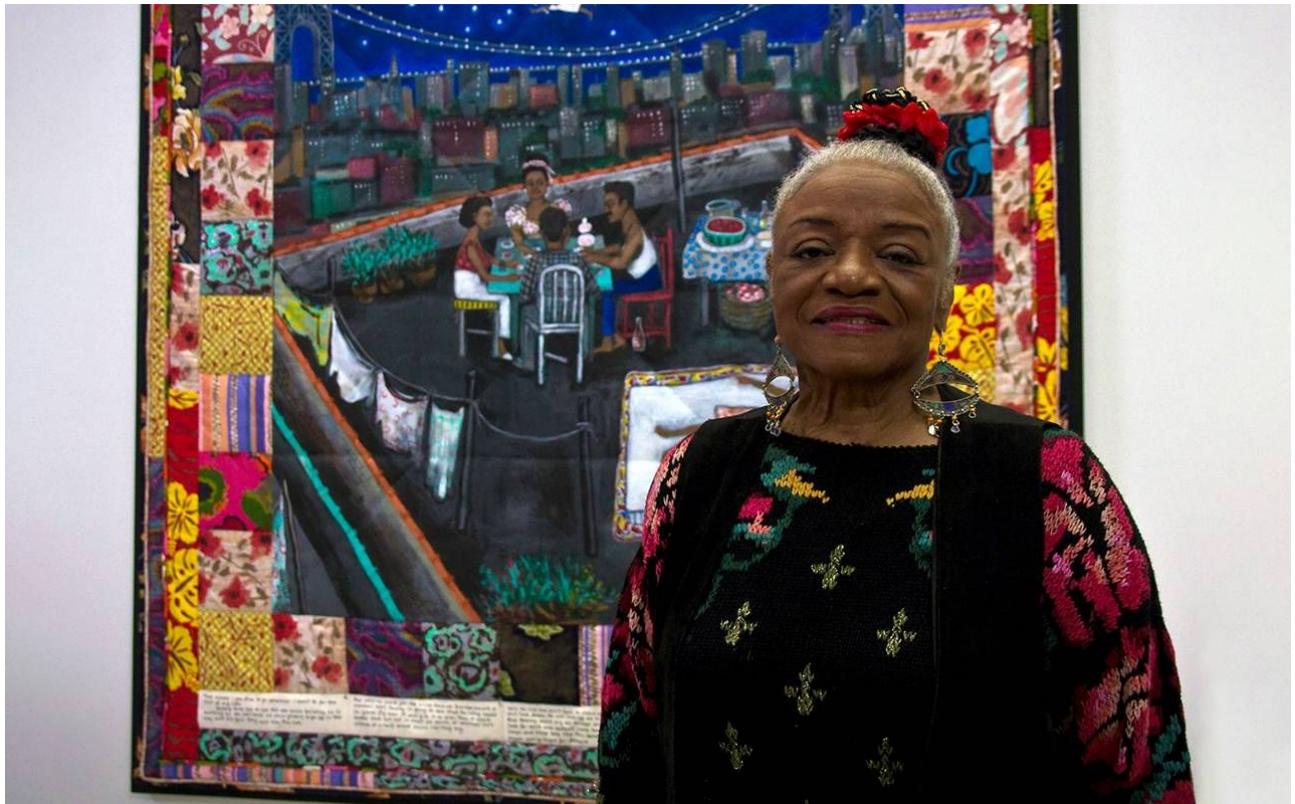
The Signature Story Quilts of Artist Faith Ringgold

An appreciation for the 92-year-old African American mixed media artist, activist and role model who continues to live creatively

By [Elizabeth Fishel](#) | March 24, 2023 | [Living](#)

For Faith Ringgold, the 92-year-old mixed media artist, necessity was the mother of invention when it came to creating the story quilts that made her famous. After a couple of decades painting large works on canvas, she realized that those paintings were too big for her to handle by herself and difficult to cart around and ship.

But if she worked on fabric, she could roll up her soft canvases and easily tote them single-handedly and mail them, when needed, "like her daughters' clothes to camp," as she joked.



Today, Ringgold has been having a major moment at museums around the country. This richly deserved, coast-to-coast attention has built slowly and steadily over decades, powered by her virtuosity and persistence. She is also among a growing number of African American artists who are finally and rightfully in the spotlight after the racial reckoning that has prompted curators nationwide to diversify their rosters.

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Ringgold's dazzling work is being showcased from New York City (The New Museum in 2022) to Chicago and Miami (The Museum of Contemporary Art and The Bass in 2023) to San Francisco, where last year I had the pleasure of seeing her career-spanning retrospective, "American People," at the de Young Museum

As I toured the exhibit, I was wowed by Ringgold's eye-popping rainbow use of color, her political passion, and most of all, her inventiveness. It's this genius for invention that has inspired her sixty-year creative life as a multi-hyphenated artist who has amazingly worked in sixteen different media — from painting to soft sculpture, from political posters to costumes for performance pieces and masks inspired by African tribal face coverings.

"She's complex and has an amazing work ethic," says Dorian Bergen, her longtime gallerist at the ACA Galleries in New York City and friend of almost 30 years. "From the moment we met I was impressed with her vision, her perseverance and her generosity to others. Faith is a force of nature whose art is imbued with a commitment to social justice in every stroke."

Her Signature Story Quilts

Ringgold is best known for her story quilts, the art form she pioneered that

marries vivid imagery, painted and collaged fabric, and text. It's a word-and-image medium that has become her signature.

In the de Young exhibit, these richly layered and original textiles surround the viewer with bright bursts of jeweled color — brick reds, intense turquoises, sunshine yellows — plus witty, whimsical designs and an overview of African American heroes and history that teach better than textbooks. These fabric works revive the historic African and African American art of quilt-making, harking back to quilts slaves brought with them from Africa that were both useful and a creative statement.

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Many of the quilts memorialize legends of the past like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks and Shirley Chisholm — and more recent legends as well. In 1989, Oprah Winfrey commissioned Ringgold to create a birthday quilt honoring the life and works of her mentor, the writer Maya Angelou. After Angelou's death, "Maya's Quilt of Life" sold for an impressive \$380,000 to the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art in Bentonville, Arkansas.



Faith Ringgold, *Echoes of Harlem*, 1980 | Credit: PBS

Meet Willa Marie Simone

When Ringgold first started creating quilts in the 1980s, she was also trying to sell her autobiography. After every publisher she approached turned it down, she wouldn't take no for an answer. Never mind the publishing industry, she figured, she could simply include her personal stories on her quilts. She invented an alter ego to speak for her whom she named Willa Marie Simone and took her on adventures all over France, from Paris to Giverny and Arles, producing a series of charming and evocative quilts called "The French Collection" in the 1990s, several part of the de Young show.

Willa's travels were inspired by the influential 1961 trip Ringgold had made to France with her mother and her two then-young daughters, Michele and Barbara. Other stand-out story quilts in the show share social commentary, like the triptych "Street Story Quilt" about urban life in a tenement, and still others, like the autobiographical "Change," document Ringgold's forty-year loss and gain of 100 pounds.