

# NATIONAL MUSEUM *of WOMEN in the ARTS*

## ***American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s***

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### **Educator's Guide**



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**Dear Educator,**

This resource packet was created by the Education Department of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, with contributions from interns Manique Buckmon and Brittany Carpenter. It was developed in conjunction with the exhibition *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s*, organized by the Neuberger Museum of Art and on view at the National Museum of Women in the Arts from June 21–November 10, 2013.

It contains digital images of nine early works by renowned artist Faith Ringgold. Information about the artist and each of these works of art is also included, together with suggested discussion questions for each artwork. You will also find worksheets outlining suggested classroom activities and related standards of learning for Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia. The text is based primarily on the scholarship and ideas presented in the exhibition catalogue, *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s*, edited by Thom Collins and Tracy Fitzpatrick, and Ringgold's memoir, *We Flew Over the Bridge*. A bibliography credits additional sources and serves as a resource for further exploration by teachers and students. We also have provided a glossary of selected art terms and movements, as well as historical moments.

We hope you find this packet a valuable reference and teaching resource even beyond the exhibition.

Sincerely,

Deborah L. Gaston  
Director of Education

## Table of Contents

### Educator’s Guide

Faith Ringgold Biography .....	3
About the Art and Discussion Questions .....	6
Glossary.....	24
Selected Bibliography .....	26
Standards of Learning: Washington, D.C. ....	28
Standards of Learning: Maryland.....	32
Standards of Learning: Virginia .....	34

### Classroom Activities

Connect / Extend / Challenge Thinking Routine .....	35
Write a Dialogue .....	36
Take a Stand.....	38
Words and Images .....	39
Creative Restraint .....	35

### Handouts

Worksheet: Connect / Extend / Challenge .....	41
Civil Rights Era Quotes: Ringgold’s Content in Context .....	43

### Reproductions

Selected Images from <i>American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold’s Paintings of the 1960s</i> .....	47
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## ***American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Painting of the 1960s***

**“I wanted my painting to express this moment I knew was history. I wanted to give my woman’s point of view to this period.”—Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 146**

Now in her early 80s, artist Faith Ringgold can look back on a career that spans more than half a century and a body of art that speaks to some of the most important social and political issues that have faced—and continue to face—the United States. She has always remained true to her identity as a politically engaged artist, even when her activism negatively affected her critical and commercial success. Indeed, the artwork included in *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s* has long been omitted from discussions and exhibitions about the 1960s. As curator Andrea Barnwell Brownlee noted in an interview, these paintings and posters “were omitted because no one wanted to see or hear about a Black woman’s pointed perspectives about race and gender at that time...their omission was calculated, silencing, deliberate.” But the questions Ringgold raised almost half a century ago through these works have continued relevance today and deserve this reconsideration.

Born Faith Willi Jones in 1930, Faith Ringgold was the youngest of three surviving children. Together with her older brother and sister, she grew up in Harlem raised by her fashion-designer mother and truck-driver father. It was the **Great Depression**, which meant they dealt with the economic hardships felt by many Americans. For the family, such difficulties were assuaged by regular visits to jazz performances that thrived during the waning years of the **Harlem Renaissance**. But by the 1940s, Ringgold recalls, Harlem had drifted into violence, which ultimately made it the locus of growing activist efforts in the 1950s.

Ringgold enjoyed art from a young age; it was often her solace and entertainment when she was bedridden with asthma as a child. Yet, it was not until after high school that she started to consider the possibility of art as a profession. In 1948 she entered City College, but it forbade women from matriculating in the school of liberal arts so Ringgold majored in education with an emphasis on art. Her art training was entirely conservative and traditional: she drew from antique sculpture; studied and copied old masters of Western art; and absorbed lessons of perspective, light, and shadow.

By 1955 she was teaching, as well as managing, a household that included her jazz-pianist husband, Robert Earl Wallace, and their two small daughters (born in January and December of 1952). After divorcing Wallace in 1954, Ringgold went on to earn her master’s degree and focus

more specifically on her own artistic development. Yet she struggled to “get from the Greek busts...to me.” Ringgold explained, “I appreciated the beauty of European art.... But I understood it wasn’t my heritage.... Most black people who are artists have the same problem. The only way you can make works of art in another person’s style is to copy.... It hampers your own development. It’s making art from art instead of art from life” (Munro, 411). Robert Gwathmey, one of her professors at City College, encouraged his students to find their own aesthetic “voices,” and he supported Ringgold’s color experiments as she sought a solution to rendering dark skin tones—traditional **chiaroscuro** did not work.

Ringgold remarried in 1962; her new husband, Burdette (Birdie) Ringgold, was a longtime family friend. Then, in the summer of 1963, Ringgold began her first major series of paintings, the *American People Series* (1963–67). Over the next four years and across 20 canvases, Ringgold created a visual record of tension-filled racial interactions and power dynamics from her own perspective as an African American woman. The canvases also reflect the cultural shift from the **civil rights era** to the **Black Power** and **Black is Beautiful movements** and from subtle tensions to overt violence. As she explains in *We Flew Over the Bridge*: “I wanted my painting to express this moment I knew was history. I wanted to give my woman’s point of view to this period” (146).

In 1966, she was invited to join the Spectrum Gallery, a cooperative gallery run by the poet and critic Robert Newman. Of the 20 artists at Spectrum Gallery, Ringgold was one of five women and the only African American. Moreover, most of the artists produced cool, unemotional abstract paintings and sculptures rather than figurative, politically charged ones. Despite Ringgold’s different aesthetic, Newman promised her a solo exhibition in December 1967. He also urged her to depict the tumult of the 1960s and offered her the use of the gallery space during the summer so that she might have space to paint and prepare for the show. Her *American People* show opened on December 19, 1967, and included all 20 works in the series.

Following her debut exhibition, Ringgold began the experiments with **palette** and subject matter that became known as her *Black Light Series* (1967–70). Concurrently, she became actively involved in art world protests against the exclusion of women and artists of color from major exhibitions and collections in New York City. Though some of these efforts related to the growing awareness of the challenges faced by women artists specifically, Ringgold says she was more interested at that time in furthering the place of black artists in the art world.

It was not until 1970 that Ringgold says she became a feminist. “In the 1960s I had rationalized that we were all fighting for the same issues and why shouldn’t the men be in charge.” Ringgold notes that a switch flipped, “...the day I decided to launch a protest against an exhibit, to be

held at the School of Visual Arts in New York, protesting the U.S. policy of war, repression, racism and sexism—an exhibit that itself was all male! I declared that if the organizers didn't include fifty percent women, there would be 'war.' Robert Morris, the organizer, agreed to open the show to women, and that was, so far as I'm concerned, the beginning of the Women's Movement in New York" (Munro, 412). To support these efforts, she and daughter Michelle Wallace founded Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL) and a year later, together with Kay Brown, she founded Where We At, a non-activist, socially conscious exhibition group for black women.

The 1970s introduced opportunities to reach new and larger audiences. Spectrum Gallery hosted her second solo exhibition, featuring her *Black Light Series* works. While continuing to teach at the high school level, Ringgold also began lecturing part-time at Pratt Institute, Banks Street Graduate School for Teachers, and Wagner College. In addition to exhibiting and teaching, Ringgold remained a working artist. After completing the colossal *For the Women's House* (1971), Ringgold took a break from painting to focus on creating political posters, a medium that allowed for mass production and distribution and thereby a wider reach.

Next, she turned to **tangka**-inspired works and soft sculptures, to which her mother contributed her skills as a seamstress. Her subject matter became more feminist at this time. By the early 1980s she had developed the art form for which she is best known today: the story quilt. As the progenitor of the African American story quilt revival, she has created well-known works including *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983). Ringgold's quilts express her ongoing interest in the power of combining words and image in art.

To this day, Ringgold is an activist, artist, and teacher. Her works can be seen in museums across the country, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Her numerous children's books inspire a new generation of aspiring artists.



*Early Works #25: Self-Portrait, 1965*

Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in.

On loan from Elizabeth A. Sackler

© Faith Ringgold 1965

Photo: Jim Frank

**“Art was the one thing that I always loved to do. Yet, because I had never heard of a black artist, male or female, when I was a child, I did not think of art as a possible profession. In retrospect, I think I must have taken art for granted at this time — as something to do rather than be.”**—Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 20

Faith Ringgold’s foray into self-portraiture coincided with the development of her figurative *American People Series* (1963–67). As a black artist establishing her career amid the **civil rights movement**, Ringgold embraced her image and explored what it meant to represent one’s inner and outer self through art. Her desire to communicate a message about the changing political and social climate solidified Ringgold’s interest in figuration at a time when **abstraction** was the favored style.

During Ringgold’s matriculation at City College, the art curriculum encouraged students to emulate western European masters while individual professors pushed students to establish a unique aesthetic. City College professor and artist Robert Gwathmey proved particularly influential in the development of Ringgold’s visual voice. An artist in his own right, Gwathmey was well known for his **social realist** depictions of blacks in the rural south. Pablo Picasso’s post-**Cubist** works and Gwathmey’s **cubistic** handling of his subject matter appealed to Ringgold at this time. *Self-Portrait*, like many of her early works, expresses a cubistic vocabulary through the simplified, flat shapes and **cloisonné**-like dark outlines. In addition to western influences, Ringgold explored formal elements found in African artifacts. In *Self-Portrait*, the oval shape framing Ringgold evokes the form and design of African war shields, while her pared down facial features suggest a mask.

Color plays a significant role in Ringgold’s work. The reds and blues of this piece represent the minimal **palette** used in her *American People Series*. In this painting, the striking “stop-sign red”

circular forms grab viewers' attention and highlight the repetition of oval masses and sinuous lines throughout the work.

Scale, both of the canvas and of the subject, is noteworthy. At the time of its creation, this work was the largest Ringgold had created given that she was working out of a small studio in her Harlem apartment. Her steadfast figure dominates and extends beyond the edge of the canvas, suggesting strength and resilience. When Ringgold painted this work, she was a mother of two daughters struggling to garner a reputation and representation in the art world.

### Discussion Questions

1. What words would you use to describe the sitter in this painting? Why?
2. Strike a pose like the artist did for this painting. How do you feel? What message might the artist have been trying to send by posing in this way?
3. A sitter's apparel, body language, and facial features are all key elements of a portrait or self-portrait. Make a claim about the artist's personality and mindset and support your claim with evidence from this painting.
4. Based on the figure's facial expression, what do you imagine she might be thinking?
5. What colors stand out in this painting? How do they make you feel?
6. What words come to mind when you see the color red? Why might Ringgold have used this color so prominently in her self-portrait?



*American People Series #1: Between Friends, 1963*

Oil on canvas, 40 x 24 in.

Collection Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College,  
State University of New York

Museum Purchase with funds provided by the Roy R. Neuberger  
Endowment fund and the friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art

**“James Baldwin had just published *The Fire Next Time*, Malcolm X was talking about ‘us loving our black selves,’ and Martin Luther King Jr. was leading marches and spreading the word. All over the county and the world people were listening to these black men. I felt called upon to create my own vision of the black experience we were witnessing.”** —Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 146

The year 1963 included some of the most significant highs and lows in the history of civil rights, from the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and landmark “March on Washington,” to the assassinations of civil rights leader Medgar Evers and President John F. Kennedy. In part because of her witness to such events, 1963 proved significant for Faith Ringgold’s artistic development as well. During that summer, Ringgold left behind her earlier **impressionistic** experiments and developed her own style. She called her new approach “**Super Realism**” because she intended to make statements about the civil rights movement and what was happening to black people in America at the time and make it “super real.” *Between Friends*, one of five paintings rendered by Ringgold that summer, marked the beginning of the *American People Series*.

Ringgold and her daughters spent the summer at Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard as the guests of Dr. and Mrs. Goldsberry. The Goldsberrys were lifetime members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and hosted numerous social gatherings for interracial groups of friends and colleagues. With her easel on their lawn, Ringgold was witness to these comings and goings. She was particularly struck by the uncomfortable interactions between their black and white visitors, even though they shared a belief in civil rights. For all their politeness and civility, such interactions were marked by an uneasy tension because the people did not quite know how to be friends.

*Between Friends* is Ringgold's response to the women who frequented the Goldsberry's weekday poker parties while their husbands were at work. The painting embodies subtle psychological tension, which Ringgold achieved through her content and her style. On the left, a black woman faces outward in a three-quarter pose; her white counterpart appears in profile on the right. The women dominate the relatively small space of the canvas, which contributes a feeling of airlessness and forced contact. At the same time, the red vertical and horizontal beams of an entryway divide the background and effectively isolate the women from one another visually. Despite their close physical proximity, the women seem miles apart psychologically—they do not appear to make eye contact with one another and do not cross into one another's **pictorial space**.

With its limited, yet saturated, palette and flat planes of color, *Between Friends* also reflects Ringgold's technical experiments at that time. She explained, "I tried to develop a style of painting related to what I imagined to be the African idiom. I still painted figures, but without the use of **chiaroscuro**—realistic but flat—to lend a high degree of visibility to the image of the American black person. And as a matter of fact, African art achieves the real look of black people. By its decorative, flat appearance, it helps project the real look of black people. If you have a dark form, and you modulate it with shadows, you have nothing. But if you flatten it out and indicate the shadows in flat, contrasting colors, you have a strong pattern" (Munro, 412). Hard lines in the image are limited to the framework behind the women and the distinctive Roman nose of the white woman—possibly a direct quotation from one of those antique sculptures Ringgold had sketched from in school. That the white woman appears in profile, emphasizing such harsh angles and denying a full view of her expression, definitely makes her appear quite literally "sharp." The formal **composition** of the painting underscores the awkward formality of the meeting between these two women. As Ringgold noted in her autobiography, "I could sense a lot of distance between friendship and what these women were sharing" (145).

Originally, Ringgold titled this work *The Wall Between Friends*, which emphasizes the interracial divide bluntly. Her change to the less direct *Between Friends* provides a broader range of possible meanings and outcomes for the relationship portrayed. We often speak of the understanding "between friends," or the special connection "between friends." The "between" in such cases indicates a particularly close, empathetic relationship two people might share. The "between" need not be something that divides. Indeed, a portion of each woman's body does overlap the central beam slightly, which may offer a sense of hope for the future of this and similar friendships.

## Discussion Questions

1. Based on composition and color, how is the idea of distance between the two figures or “Friends” reflected in this painting?
2. Some viewers and critics argue that the black woman is seeking to make eye contact with the white woman; others believe neither is making eye contact. How do these different interpretations change the potential meaning of the image? Why might Ringgold have allowed this ambiguity?
3. Ringgold felt it important to render, and at times omit, female figures in her art to communicate messages about women’s roles in the civil rights movement. Comparing her depiction of the women in *Between Friends* with those in *American People Series #20: Die*, what message(s) do you think Ringgold is communicating about the social and political roles women played in the 1960s? What adjectives would you use to describe the women in these artworks?



*American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding*,  
1967

Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 in.

Courtesy of Faith Ringgold and ACA Galleries, New York

© Faith Ringgold 1967

Photo courtesy ACA Galleries, New York

**“I was partially inspired by Jasper Johns’ flag series [because] it presented a beautiful, but incomplete, idea. To complete it I wanted to show some of the hell that had broken out in the States, and what better place to do that than in the stars and stripes?”**—Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 158

The year 1966 proved to be a watershed moment for Ringgold. In the fall, the artist’s work was included in the exhibition *Art of the American Negro*, sponsored by the Harlem Cultural Council. This show was noteworthy both because it marked her first gallery appearance and was curated by fellow African American artist Romare Bearden. Not long after, Robert Newman, director of the Spectrum Gallery, invited her to join. The Spectrum Gallery, a cooperative gallery in Manhattan, comprised approximately 20 artists of which Ringgold was the only African American. Newman quickly scheduled Ringgold’s first solo show for December 1967 and gave her access to the gallery, encouraging her to use it as a studio in preparation. “Newman wanted me to depict everything that was happening in America—the sixties and the decade’s tumultuous thrusts for freedom” (Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 156).

Up to this point in her career, Ringgold focused on creating small works that packed a big visual and emotional punch. On canvases averaging three-by-four feet she broached hot-button issues including the realities of race relations in the country. Conversely, mainstream art of the time was large-scale and “cool, unemotional, uninvolved, and not ‘about’ anything” (Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 154). Ringgold eschewed the prevailing tendencies of the art world to avoid heavy subject matter. Pushing the envelope during her time of creation at Spectrum, Ringgold produced work of increased size and intensity.

In one such artwork, *American People Series #18: The Flag is Bleeding*, a monumental six-by-eight-foot painting, Ringgold superimposed a depiction of the United States flag on three interlocking figures. Inspired by Jasper Johns’ flag paintings of the 1950s

([http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=78805](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=78805)), Ringgold **appropriated** the 48-star flag (which dates from 1912 to 1959) rather than the 50-star flag because she preferred the visual regularity and balance of the former. Ringgold recontextualizes this outdated American flag in the socio-historical context of the late 1960s and in doing so asks viewers to question this symbol's true meaning. Ringgold's title **anthropomorphizes** this **motif**, pressing the viewer to consider the flag as a stand-in for the American people, who became both victims and perpetrators of racial inequality and violence.

The subject matter and formal elements of this work elevate Ringgold's concept of Super Realism. *The Flag is Bleeding* displays three **archetypal** figures that recede into the background of a bleeding American flag. Central to the composition is a diminutive, youthful, white female. She is dwarfed by the black male figure to her right and white male figure to her left. Yet she also connects them—bridges the gap between them—by interlocking her arms with theirs. The interconnected arms suggest solidarity and equality, yet the figures' disconnected gazes and stark facial expressions suggest otherwise. Each figure stares blankly out at the viewer, through a curtain of blood oozing from the flag's red stripes. The black male figure has placed his right hand over his heart, a gesture that can be read as an attempt to pledge allegiance as well as to slow the bleeding from a chest wound. This apparent victim clutches a knife with his left hand, armed to defend himself against future attacks. The white male figure's aggressive stance and dominant size embody the white, specifically male, power structure of the time and imply the stubborn continuation of racial segregation. Though weapons are not visible on the white male figure, Ringgold suggests he "packs a gun on each hip, ready to draw, western style" (*We Flew Over the Bridge*, 157).

This work highlights Ringgold's overall concerns with the condition of race relations amid the chaos of the violent and highly publicized events of the mid-to-late '60s. In her juxtaposition of common **iconography** and bloodshed, Ringgold questions the notion of an American identity for blacks or people of color under the harsh circumstances of racial discrimination and oppression.

## Discussion Questions

1. What ideals does the American flag represent? How is Ringgold challenging those ideals in this artwork? How is she reinforcing them?
2. Ringgold chose not to include a black woman among the figures represented in this painting. Why might this be? Ask students to research the role of women of color during the civil rights movement and posit why Ringgold excluded one. Relevant articles include:

Associated Press. "Women had key roles in the civil rights movement." *NBC News*. 29 Oct. 2005. 19 Sept. 2013 <[http://www.nbcnews.com/id/9862643/ns/us\\_news-life/t/women-had-key-roles-civil-rights-movement/#.UjstJ8amiSp](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/9862643/ns/us_news-life/t/women-had-key-roles-civil-rights-movement/#.UjstJ8amiSp)>.

Smithsonian Institution. "Freedom's Sisters" brochure. 2008. 19. Sept. 2013 <<http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/freedomsSistersBrochure.pdf>>.

Goldstein, Jessica. "March on Washington had on female speaker: Josephine Baker." *Washington Post*. 23 Aug. 2011. 19 Sept. 2013 <[http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-08-23/lifestyle/35270325\\_1\\_josephine-baker-kings-and-queens-big-mouth](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-08-23/lifestyle/35270325_1_josephine-baker-kings-and-queens-big-mouth)>.

Parker, Dennis. "Honoring the women of the civil rights movement." *American Civil Liberties Union*. 29 March 2011. 19 Sept. 2013 <<http://www.aclu.org/blog/racial-justice-womens-rights/honoring-women-civil-rights-movement>>.

Solis, Steph. "Strong women were pillars behind civil rights movement." *USA Today*. 19 Aug. 2013. 19 Sept. 2013 <<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/08/19/march-on-washington-women/2648011/>>.

3. Each figure in this work expresses strengths and weaknesses. Using visual evidence, identify and discuss at least one strength and one weakness of each figure.
4. Ask students research the 1960s civil rights movement by reviewing primary sources (e.g. newspaper articles, magazine pictorials, photographs, etc.). Then ask them to create a visual timeline of events and important people associated with this movement.
5. Discuss the events of years leading up to Ringgold's painting of *The Flag is Bleeding*. How might they have informed this piece?



*American People Series #20: Die*, 1967  
 Oil on canvas 72 x 144 in.  
 Courtesy of Faith Ringgold and ACA Galleries,  
 New York  
 © Faith Ringgold 1967  
 Photo courtesy ACA Galleries, New York

**“I had to paint *Die* just as I had felt propelled to paint the other two murals in this series. I was also terrified because I saw *Die* as a prophecy of our times.”** —Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 159

Faith Ringgold concluded her *American People Series* with *Die*, the last and largest of three mural-sized works completed in the summer of 1967. Leaving behind the subtle exploration of racial tensions seen in earlier works in the series, such as *Between Friends*, Ringgold here tackled overt racial violence without flinching. Her shift in tone paralleled the changes in social activism at a time when non-violent civil rights efforts were giving way to more militant social action, along with race riots and police confrontations. By 1967, the United States had endured several summers of race riots, protests, and police confrontations. Additionally, this period saw the rise of the Black Power movement as articulated by Stokely Carmichael and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

Though it does not illustrate a particular riot, *Die* seeks to embody the violence, fear, and anger that were at the heart of such clashes. This startling image makes clear that no one is safe. People of all races, genders, and ages are threatened by the horrors of discrimination. Especially, and most disturbingly, is the next generation, represented by the black and white children who cling together amid the chaos. As in *The Flag is Bleeding*, women act as change agents, stepping in harm’s way to intervene, protect, and attempt to stop the violence. But it is unclear whether their efforts will succeed.

Ringgold arrays her figures, **frieze**-like, against a gray-scale, checkerboard background that provides no distraction from the difficult subject. Her hard-edged, angular forms create a visual severity that parallels the emotional and physical brutality of the image. The 10 full or partial adult figures are splayed across the width of the canvas, taking in our peripheral vision. The male figure on the far left margin, indicated only by part of his left arm and leg and right foot indicates that the violence captured here is only a small portion of the overall scene; that simple **cropping** of a figure reminds us that this violence is expansive, not contained. The faces

read as horrified masks or even **caricature**. These are not specific individuals, but embodiments of emotions and actions that could overwhelm any of us. Whereas the blood in *The Flag is Bleeding* was relatively contained, in *Die* it takes over the image—only the pair of children are unmarked by it.

*Die* has been compared by some critics and scholars to Pablo Picasso's painting *Guernica*, his monumental response to the atrocities of the saturation bombing of a small Spanish town during the Spanish Civil War. A frenzied composition of intertwined **vignettes** of death and suffering, angular forms, and overall loss of life are certainly traits of both artworks. Interestingly, Ringgold had seen *Guernica* and designated it her favorite Picasso painting. Her painting also evokes aspects of the race riot imagery in *The Migration Series* (1940–42) by Jacob Lawrence, whom she admired.

Clearly, *Die* is one of Ringgold's most overt social commentaries. Yet, she noted, "Despite the 'revolution' going on in the street...[mainstream] art was...not about anything. Issue-oriented art was dismissed as being naïve, if not downright vulgar. Art was [supposed to be] a conceptual or material process, a commodity and not a political platform.... To be emotionally involved in art was considered primitive" (Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 154).

The contrast of Ringgold's style and subject matter with that of more mainstream artists of her day is particularly evident if we compare her painting *Die* with a work of the same title created by sculptor Tony Smith in 1962 (<http://whitney.org/Collection/TonySmith>). Smith's *Die* is a monumental black cube crafted of steel. This piece conjures words like emotionless, mundane, and industrial. But the title seems evocative. Perhaps the shape of the work means the title refers to one of a pair of dice? Or its dark color might indicate the mourning that goes with death? As a Minimalist, Smith would have denied any such associations. He intended his artwork to be viewed purely formally, without layers of metaphor, emotion, and interpretation attached to them.

Ringgold's approach did negatively impact her ability to get gallery representation and sell work, but she felt she had to stay true to her identity as an artist who believed in political engagement. As she wryly noted: "In New York I found it difficult to exhibit my work because of my figurative style, the political content, the lack of social connections in the art world and also because being black and a woman was not as fashionable as the civil rights movement and [the] Women's Liberation Movement might suggest" (Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 186).

## Discussion Questions

1. Art historian Lisa Farrington has argued that *Die* is the “most explicit incarnation” in the *American People Series* of James Baldwin’s apocalyptic commentary in *The Fire Next Time* (1962): “If we...do not falter in our duty now, we may be able...to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water the fire next time.*” In what ways do you agree or disagree with Farrington’s interpretation?
2. Compare and contrast the subject and style of *Die* with that of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (<http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/guernica>) and Jacob Lawrence’s race riot works ([http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3418&page\\_number=19&template\\_id=1&sort\\_order=1](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3418&page_number=19&template_id=1&sort_order=1)) and ([http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3418&page\\_number=18&template\\_id=1&sort\\_order=1](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3418&page_number=18&template_id=1&sort_order=1)).

What traits make such works effective social commentary (or not)? Do you feel any of these works are more effective than the others? Why or why not.

3. Consider the title of this work. Why do you think Ringgold used the verb “die” rather than the noun “death” for this work? In what ways does her choice affect how we read this image? Whose “voice” do you think is commanding us/the people in the artwork to die? What other deaths might this title imply?



*Black Light Series #1: Big Black*, 1967

Oil on canvas, 30 ¼ x 42 ¼ in.

Courtesy of Faith Ringgold and ACA Galleries, New York

© Faith Ringgold 1967

Photo: Jim Frank

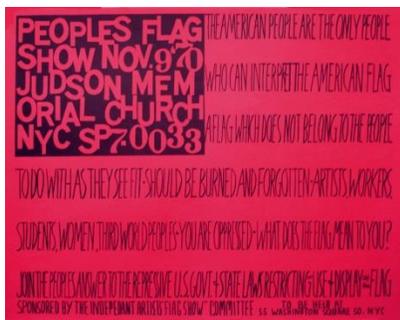
**“In 1967 I had begun to explore the idea of a new palette, a way of expressing on canvas the new ‘black is beautiful’ sense of ourselves...I was now committed to ‘black light’ and subtle color nuances and compositions based on my interest in African rhythm, pattern, and repetition.”** —Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 162

Following the completion of her *American People Series* in 1967, Ringgold began to explore a new project and a new **palette**. This evolution coincided with Ringgold’s increased political and art activism, including her protests of art institutions that excluded black and women artists. According to Ringgold, “America was changing in the summer of 1967. We were moving out of the civil rights period and were at the start of the Black Revolution” (Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 156). To contribute to this emerging dialogue, Ringgold created the *Black Light Series* (1967–70), in which she continued her exploration of race and experimentation with pigment’s tonal variations.

Ringgold’s formal education did not adequately prepare her to depict the rich, varied tonalities of figures of color so she sought to develop an authentic way of doing so. Inspired by Ad Reinhardt’s handling of black paint in his **monochrome** abstractions of the 1950s (<http://adreinhardt.org/reinhardtoundation>), Ringgold adapted Reinhardt’s use of multiple shades of black and divided her forms into color grids. *Big Black*, the first work in this experimental *Black Light Series*, is an abstracted study of **physiognomies** suggested by African masks. Ringgold used a range of blacks tinted with brown, red, yellow, blue, and green pigments in order to animate her images. Shying away from using white paint in this work and the others in this series, Ringgold nonetheless successfully depicts figures that emanate light.

## Discussion Questions

1. Ringgold is referencing an African mask in this artwork. Ask your students to consider and share the various reasons one might choose to wear a mask.
2. Just as Ringgold deliberately uses color to communicate a visual message, she carefully selects words for her titles to express ideas. Given the political and social climate in the U.S. when this piece was painted, what message(s) do you think Ringgold is communicating with the title *Big Black*?



*The People's Flag Show, 1970*

Cut paper and pen on paper poster

18 x 24 inches

Courtesy of Faith Ringgold and ACA Galleries, New York

© Faith Ringgold 1970

Photo: Jim Frank

**“This was a time of massive protests about the war in Vietnam, and Richard Nixon was our president; but still I did not see the danger of being arrested.... I had been using the American flag as a form of protest in my paintings since 1964.... It was thought that our show, organized by artists, would give real strength to the artists’ right for free ‘speech.’—Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 181**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Faith Ringgold actively participated in a range of protests and related actions centered in the New York art world, among them *The People's Flag Show* in 1970. For that exhibition, she created this poster, which united her previous explorations of both flag imagery and text.

Ringgold’s art world activism began in 1968 when she joined a host of others in the community to protest the exclusion of black artists from the Whitney Museum’s exhibition, *The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America*. Soon, she was involved with the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC) and its ultimately unsuccessful efforts to get the Museum of Modern Art to establish a Martin Luther King, Jr. wing for black and Puerto Rican artists. She also participated in protests against the gross underrepresentation of women and artists of color in the Whitney Museum Annual.

Her first posters date to 1970 and seem a logical outgrowth of her long-standing interest in using words and text within her paintings. Though often recognized today as a legitimate art form, poster art at that time was viewed more as an affordable and effective means of communicating with a mass audience. Such posters could be printed in multiples to be distributed at meetings and protests; in the case of *The People's Flag Show* poster, it functioned as publicity and was also sold inexpensively at the opening.

*The People's Flag Show* exhibition was organized by a committee of independent artists who wanted to protest against American oppression in the states and abroad and took place at the

Judson Memorial Church in New York's Greenwich Village. More than 200 artists presented artwork and performances that included the American flag as a motif. As both an emblem and a symbol of the United States, the American flag has long history as a potent symbol of patriotism and protest. It was an ideal stand-in for the social realities and government policies of the country that the artists were challenging.

In addition to exhibiting work, Ringgold created the exhibition poster using cut-paper and inscribed the text with pen and ink. She took the American flag as the basic form for the composition, but used a red and black palette rather than the traditional one. Against a black ground where the stars would normally be, she includes the name, date and location of the show. The text, arranged to form the flag's six white stripes, was drawn from a statement by the artist's daughter, Michelle Wallace:

**The American people are the only people**

**Who can interpret the American flag**

**A flag which does not belong to the people**

**To do with as they see fit · Should be burned and forgotten · Artists, workers,**

**Students, women, third world peoples · You are oppressed · What does the flag mean to you?**

**Join the peoples answer to the repressive U.S. govt & state laws restricting our use & display of the flag**

On opening night, artists Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche presented a performance piece in which they burned a flag together with old bones and rotten meat. Artist Yvonne Rainer and a group of dancers performed wearing nothing more than flags tied around their necks. Ringgold felt certain that such performances would lead to arrests, but opening night went off without comment. In fact, throughout the first days of the exhibition, several equally radical performances took place without disturbance from the police. At closing on the fourth day, however, Ringgold, Hendricks, and Toche were arrested for desecrating the flag, though Ringgold had had no such criticism of her flag imagery before. Dubbed "The Judson Three," the trio embodied for many the cause of artistic freedom of speech. Many people contributed money to their defense. They were ultimately acquitted of all charges on appeal, but the episode deeply affected Ringgold, as she recounts in her autobiography.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is a symbol? Other than the American flag, what common symbols represent the United States?
2. What words and ideas do you associate with the American flag? Are these also concepts you associate with the United States? Why might artists like Ringgold use symbols in their art?
3. Consider the text that Ringgold used on her poster. How do you feel about those ideas?
4. Artists who participated in *The People's Flag Show* believed that their use of the American flag in their artwork was protected as free speech under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The First Amendment reads:  
 "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Do you believe visual art should be considered a form of free speech and therefore be protected? Why or why not?

5. After reading and analyzing the Federal Flag Desecration Law of 1968 (<http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/700>), consider the artistic use of the flag motif by Ringgold and her peers in the 1970s in tandem with similar uses in the 1980s and 1990s, which also resulted in arrests and/or efforts to suppress the artwork. For example:
  - Dread Scott's *What is the Proper Way to Display an American Flag?* (1989) (installed as part of student exhibition; Art Institute of Chicago) <http://www.dreadscott.net/artwork/photography/what-is-the-proper-way-to-display-a-us-flag>
  - *Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art* exhibition (Phoenix Art Museum, opened March 1996) <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/08/us/art-or-trash-arizona-exhibit-on-american-flag-unleashes-a-controversy.html>

What similarities and differences do you see in the artistic use of the flag and social/political response to the artwork and artists? What do these similarities and differences tell us about the ongoing power of the flag as a symbol?



*For The Women's House*, 1971  
 Oil on canvas, 96 x 96 inches  
 Courtesy Rose M. Singer Center, New York  
 © Faith Ringgold 1971  
 Photo courtesy of the artist

**“[My intention was] to broaden women’s images of themselves by showing women in roles that have not been traditionally theirs...and to show women’s universality by painting a work which crosses the lines of age, race, and class.”** —Faith Ringgold, Quoted in Lisa E. Farrington, *Faith Ringgold*, from a Ringgold autobiographical essay (dated 1973)

In 1970, the New York State Council on the Arts awarded Faith Ringgold a Creative Arts Public Service (CAPS) grant in the program’s inaugural year in order to execute a mural for a public institution. According to the Council’s 1970–71 annual report, Ringgold was creating for a good cause and was in good company. “Awards ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000 were made to a total of 123 artists who would make their activities more widely available through public services such as readings, lectures, workshops, residencies, performances, exhibitions, and donations of work to public institutions.” Ringgold chose the Women’s House of Detention (now Rose Singer Detention Center) at Rikers Island, in New York City, for the site of this, her first public commission.

Ringgold completed the resulting artwork, *For The Women’s House*, after spending time interviewing inmates. The inmates asked the artist to depict concepts such as “justice, freedom...peace, a long road leading out of here, the rehabilitation of all prisoners, [and] all races of people holding hands” (Farrington, *Faith Ringgold*, 36). This monumental piece is a collaborative realization of the inmates’ hopes and Ringgold’s feminist ideals.

Formally, Ringgold employs **Kuba** triangle frames to create eight independent but connected **vignettes**. Farrington notes that this type of composition “strengthen[s] the narrative by allowing the viewer to read each ‘episode’ like a succession of comic strip panels...the [Kuba] grid holds [the] various [compositional] elements together.” (*Faith Ringgold*, 36). The triangles depict women of various races and ages in nontraditional roles for that time, including a preacher, police officer, doctor, and even the President of the United States. Ringgold’s goal in

painting this work was to inspire and offer hope to the incarcerated women who would bear witness to it each day.

The mural was installed at the Women's House of Detention on Rikers Island in 1972. In the early 1990s, that facility began to house male inmates instead of female. To appease the new residents, *For The Women's House* was whitewashed in preparation for a new painting by a male inmate who was an amateur artist. Outraged, a guard who had been present when the mural was originally installed contacted Ringgold, who in turn reached out to the Commissioner of the Department of Corrections to save the work. The City of New York arranged for the work's conservation and its installation at the new women's prison, the Rose M. Singer Center. This exhibition marks the first time *For The Women's House* has left Rikers Island.

### Discussion Questions

1. What professions are depicted in this piece? What **attributes** provide clues to the figures' professions? Ask students to identify at least one attribute for each primary figure.
2. Which of these professions are still not common for women? Which have become more common since this work was painted in 1971?
3. Ask your students to imagine that they were commissioned to create a companion piece that depicts professions uncommon or unattainable for women today. Which professions would they include? Ask students to create a collage based on their ideas, using the Kuba triangle composition.

## Glossary

**abstraction** – artworks that do not represent actual objects

**anthropomorphize** – to make something human-like

**appropriate** – to take for one's own, often without right, to borrow

**archetypal** – having the qualities of a type of person

**attribute** – a quality or characteristic that represents a particular person or thing

**Black is Beautiful movement** – a cultural movement that began in the United States in the 1960s that embraced and celebrated black peoples' natural features

**Black Power movement** – a political and cultural movement and ideology that began in the United States in the 1960s that sought self-determination for African Americans

**caricature** – an exaggerated picture or drawing of a figure

**chiaroscuro** – the use of shade and light in a work of art to depict three-dimensionality

**civil rights era/movement** – a nationwide effort in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s to end segregation and gain equal rights for black citizens

**composition** – the visual organization of a work of art

**Cubist** – a style of art in which natural forms are broken up in to geometric shapes

**cubistic** – derivative of or inspired by Cubist artwork

**cloisonné** – jewelry design and enamel decoration technique which uses dark metal as an outline

**cropping** – to cut or remove from a composition

**frieze** – a decorative, continuous band in architecture and art

**Great Depression** – a severe economic crisis in the United States that began with the stock market crash of 1929 and lasted into the 1930s

**Harlem Renaissance** – a revival and flourishing of black musical, artistic, and literary culture in New York City after World War I

**iconography** – symbolic representation; often associated with a conventional or widely accepted meaning of images

**impressionistic** – derivative or inspired by the qualities of Impressionist artwork, including loose brush strokes, abstracted forms, and a focus on light

**Kuba** – the artistic style of a people that live in central Congo

**monochrome** – a work of art made up of shades of a single color

**motif** – a reoccurring subject, theme, or image

**palette** – the colors used in a work of art

**physiognomy** – facial features or expressions, thought to reveal qualities of mind or character

**pictorial space** – the illusory space an artist creates so that two-dimensional work of art appears to have depth

**social realist** – artwork that depicts the conditions and struggles of the working class and the poor

**Super Realism** – a term coined by Faith Ringgold to describe her artworks that depict social and political subject matter

**tangka** – a traditional Nepalese art form consisting of a painting on fabric, often on silk with embroidery, that depicts Buddhist subject matter

**vignette** – a scene within a work of art

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## Standards of Learning: Washington, D.C.

### Language Arts

#### Kindergarten – 8<sup>th</sup> grade:

- Strand: Writing
- Strand: Language Development
- Strand: Informational Text
- Strand: Research

#### 8<sup>th</sup> Grade:

- Language Arts Strand: Literary Text
  - 8.LT-C.1. Relate a literary work to artifacts, artistic creations, or historical sites of the period of its setting.
- Language Arts Strand: Media
  - 8.M.1. Analyze the effect of images, text, and sound in electronic journalism on the viewer, distinguishing the techniques used in each to achieve these effects.

#### 9<sup>th</sup> Grade:

- Language Arts Strand: Literary Text
  - 9.LT-C.1. Relate a literary work to the artistic and musical masterpieces of the period in which it was written.

### Social Studies/History

#### Kindergarten:

- Social Studies: Civic Values
  - K.4. Students identify and describe the events or people celebrated during U.S. national holidays and why Americans celebrate them (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr. and Flag Day). (P)
  - K.5. Students identify important American symbols such as the American flag and its colors and shapes, the bald eagle, the Statue of Liberty, and the words of the Pledge of Allegiance. (P)
  - K.6. Students retell stories that illustrate honesty, courage, friendship, respect, responsibility, and the wise or judicious exercise of authority, and they explain how the stories show these qualities.

- 1. Distinguish between fictional characters and real people in the school, the community, the nation, or internationally who are or were good leaders and good citizens, and explain the qualities that made them admirable (e.g., honesty, dependability, modesty, trustworthiness, or courageousness). (P, S)

**1<sup>st</sup> Grade:**

- Social Studies: Civic Values
  - 1. Understand when and why we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Flag Day. (P)
- Analysis Skills:
  - 4. Students use non-text primary and secondary sources, such as maps, charts, graphs, photographs, works of art, and technical charts.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Grade:**

- Social Studies: Civic Values
  - 2.4. Students understand the importance of individual action and character, and they explain, from examining biographies, how people who have acted righteously have made a difference in others' lives and have achieved the status of heroes in the remote and recent past. (P, S)
  - 2.2. Students describe the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
    - 1. Identify the rights and responsibilities that students have in the school as citizens and members of the school community (e.g., right to vote in a class election, responsibility to follow school rules, responsibility not to harm one another, and responsibility to respect each other's feelings). (P)

**3<sup>rd</sup> Grade:**

- History of D.C.
  - 2. Construct a chronological explanation of key people and events that were important in shaping the character of Washington, D.C., during the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. (H, P, S)
  - 5. Identify and research outstanding statements of moral and civic principles made in Washington, D.C., as well as the leaders who delivered them, that contributed to the struggle to extend equal rights to all Americans (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr. and his speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963). (P)

**5<sup>th</sup> Grade:**

- Economic growth and reform in contemporary America

- 5.14. Students describe the key events and accomplishments of the civil rights movement in the United States.
  - 1. Describe the proliferation of the civil rights movement of African Americans from the churches of the rural South to the urban North. (G, P)
  - 2. Explain the role of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). (P)
  - 3. Identify key leaders in the struggle to extend equal rights to all Americans through the decades (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X). (P)
  - 5. Explain the women’s rights movement, including differing perspectives on the roles of women. (P, S)

### 11<sup>th</sup> Grade:

- 11.11. Students analyze the origins, goals, key events, and accomplishments of civil rights movement in the United States.
  - 4. Explain the role of institutions (e.g., the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP). (P)
  - 5. Describe the legacies and ideologies of key people (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr., Ella Jo Baker, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X). (P)
  - 10. Analyze the women’s rights movement launched in the 1960s, including differing perspectives on the roles of women, the National Organization of Women, and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). (P, S)
- 11.12. Students analyze important events and trends in the 1960s and 1970s.
  - 10. Describe the Black Power and black studies movements. (P, S)

### 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> Grades:

#### Social Studies Skills

- Historical Chronology and Interpretation:
  - 1. Students compare the present with the past, evaluating the consequences of past events and decisions and determining the lessons that were learned.
  - 2. Students analyze how change happens at different rates at different times, understand that some aspects can change while others remain the same, and understand that change is complicated and affects not only technology and politics but also values and beliefs.
  - 3. Students show the connections, causal and otherwise, between particular historical events and larger social, economic, and political trends and developments.

- 7. Students understand the meaning, implication, and impact of historical events and recognize that events could have taken other directions.

## Visual Arts

### All Grades:

- Strand 1: Artistic Perception
  - Perceive and understand the components of visual language: the elements of art and the principles of design.
- Strand 3: Historical and Cultural Context
  - Investigate and understand history and cultural dimensions of the visual arts and to construct meaning in the diverse ways in which human experience is expressed across time and place.
- Strand 4: Aesthetics, Valuing, and Perspectives of Art
  - Respond to, describe, analyze, and make judgments about works in the visual arts.
- Connections, Relationships, and Applications
  - Connect and apply what is learned in the visual arts to other art forms, subject areas, visual culture and communication, and careers.

## Standards of Learning: Maryland

### Language Arts

#### Kindergarten – 8<sup>th</sup> grade:

- Strand 2: Comprehension of Informational Text
- Strand 4: Writing
- Strand 6: Listening
- Strand 7: Speaking

#### 9<sup>th</sup> –12<sup>th</sup> grades:

- Standard 1: The student will comprehend and interpret a variety of print, non-print and electronic texts, and other media.
- Standard 2: The student will analyze and evaluate a variety of print, non-print and electronic texts, and other media.
- Standard 3: The student will compose in a variety of modes by developing content, employing specific forms, and selecting language appropriate for a particular audience and purpose.

### Social Studies/History

#### Kindergarten:

- B. Individual and Group Participation in the Political System
- 1. Identify people important to the American political system
  - Identify the contributions of people, past and present
  - Use informational text to identify and discuss the contributions of individuals recognized on national holidays, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Grade:

- B. Individual and Group Participation in the Political System
- 1. Identify and describe people important to the American political system
  - Describe the contributions of people, past and present, such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the current president
  - Explain how contributions of people may be recognized with holidays and celebrations, such as Presidents' Day and Veterans' Day

**High School:**

- US History
  - 3. Analyze the major developments, controversies and consequences of the civil rights movement between 1946 and 1968 (5.4.3).
    - OBJECTIVES
      - Examine the role of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (PS, G)
      - Describe various activities that civil rights activists used to protest segregation, including boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and voter registration campaigns (PS, E)
      - Compare the philosophies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement (PS, PNW)
      - Describe the impact of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s and Malcolm X's leadership and assassinations on the civil rights movement (PS, PNW)
      - Describe why urban violence and race riots escalated during the 1960s in reaction to ongoing discrimination and the slow pace of civil rights advances (PS, PNW, G)
  - 4. Analyze the major developments, controversies and consequences of the civil rights movements from 1968 to 1980 (5.5.4).

**Visual Arts****Kindergarten – 8<sup>th</sup> grade:**

- Strand 1: Perceiving and Responding: Aesthetic Education
- Strand 2: Historical, Cultural, and Social Context
- Strand 4: Aesthetics and Criticism

## Standards of Learning: Virginia

### Language Arts

#### All Grades:

- Strand: Oral Language
- Strand: Writing

### Social Studies/History

#### Kindergarten:

- K.1 The student will recognize that history describes events and people of other times and places by:
  - b) identifying the people and events honored by the holidays of Martin Luther King, Jr., Day.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Grade:

- 1.2 The student will describe the stories of American leaders and their contributions to our country.
- 1.11 The student will recognize the symbols and traditional practices that honor and foster patriotism in the United States by:
  - a) identifying the American flag, bald eagle, Washington Monument, and Statue of Liberty.

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade:

- 2.11 The student will identify Martin Luther King, Jr., as an American whose contributions improved the lives of other Americans.

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade:

- 3.11 The student will explain the importance of the basic principles that form the foundation of a republican form of government by:
  - a) describing the individual rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and equality under the law;
  - b) identifying the contributions of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.

**4<sup>th</sup> Grade:**

- U.S. History 1865 – Present
  - USII.9 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the key domestic and international issues during the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by:
    - a) examining the Civil rights movement and the changing role of women.
- Virginia and United States History
  - VUS.14 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s by:
    - b) describing the importance of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the 1963 March on Washington.
- Virginia and United States Government:
  - GOVT.11 The student will demonstrate knowledge of civil liberties and civil rights by:
    - a) examining the Bill of Rights, with emphasis on First Amendment freedoms;
    - c) explaining selective incorporation of the Bill of Rights;
    - d) exploring the balance between individual liberties and the public interest;
    - e) explaining every citizen’s right to be treated equally under the law.

**Visual Arts****Kindergarten – 8<sup>th</sup> grade:**

- Art History and Cultural Context
- Analysis, Evaluation, and Critique
- Aesthetics

## Classroom Activities

### *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Painting of the 1960s*

#### Connect / Extend / Challenge Thinking Routine

##### Materials:

- Color reproductions of works from the *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Painting of the 1960s* exhibition, posted
- Worksheet: Connect / Extend / Challenge (1 per student)
- Pencils
- Post-Its/Whiteboard for sharing questions

Introduction: Share with your students a brief biography of Faith Ringgold and provide historical context for the time period when she painted the works they will see.

##### Procedure:

1. Create an art gallery in your classroom by printing out color reproductions of Faith Ringgold's artworks and posting them on your walls.
2. Conduct a 'gallery walk,' by encouraging your students to walk around the room to look closely at the artworks on display.
3. Provide your students with the Worksheet: Connect / Extend / Challenge and ask them to complete this in front of an artwork of their choice.
4. When students have completed this exercise, ask them to pair up with a peer and share their thoughts and questions. Ask each pair to share two questions for class consideration. Students should post these questions on a wall or whiteboard.

Extension: Use these questions as a jumping off point for further exploration of Ringgold's work and lessons on the Civil Rights movement.

## Write a Dialogue

### Materials:

- Color reproductions OR projected images of works from the *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Painting of the 1960s* exhibition
- Paper
- Pencils

Introduction: Share with students that art is a visual narrative and that if we look closely, we can 'read' the story being depicted. Artists, like writers, provide us with clues to help us make sense of the story he/she is telling. Important clues include the **figures** (including their gaze, appearance, and body language), **setting**, **composition**, and **palette**. Discuss the building blocks of a good story (e.g. characters, setting, conflict; resolution) and how they parallel narrative elements in works of art.

### Procedure:

1. Select and project in your classroom a Ringgold painting that focuses on interpersonal interactions. Facilitate an open-ended conversation about this piece with your students. Try Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a methodology that encourages students to think about and articulate what story is being told in artworks <[www.vtshome.org](http://www.vtshome.org)>.
  - a. What's going on in this picture?
  - b. What do you see that makes you say that?
  - c. What more can we find?
2. Share more about the history and context of the work after the discussion.
3. Share an image of *Between Friends* (projected or hard copy) and ask the students to spend time looking closely at it.
4. Now ask students to imagine the conversation between the figures in the work and then write a dialogue. Alternatively, they can select one figure in the work and write an internal monologue for him/her. If your students need inspiration, post the following questions:
  - a. What is the status of each figure, and how does that impact this interaction?
  - b. Does each figure represent an individual or an **archetype**?
  - c. Who is the protagonist? Who is the antagonist?
  - d. What are the figures' motives?

- e. Who is in control/who has power in this interaction?
  - f. What is the conflict? Can it be resolved? If yes, how?
  - g. What, if any, resolution do you imagine?
5. Ask students to make note of how the figures, setting, composition, and palette impacted their reading of the work and informed their writing.
  6. Time permitting, ask students to volunteer to read their writing.

Extension: Have each student conduct a peer review of a classmate's composition. The original author should then revise his/her writing based on recommendations. Using the final version, ask students to take on the roles of the figures and present a staged reading of the dialogues in class. Alternatively, have students create podcasts by recording dramatic readings of their dialogues.

## Take a Stand

### Materials:

- Color reproductions of works from the *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Painting of the 1960s* exhibition, posted
- Space for students to stand around the artworks posted

**Introduction:** Explain that an important step in appreciating and analyzing art is making informed judgments about what we see. This activity is designed to allow participants to express personal opinions and make judgments about Ringgold's works of art. Reassure them that there are no wrong answers, though they should be expected to defend their ideas using visual evidence.

### Procedure:

1. Let students know that you will be asking them questions about the works on view. Once you have read a question, students should 'take a stand' by standing in front the work they feel best answers the question. Allow students to do a 'gallery walk' for a few minutes before asking questions.
2. Read a question from those listed below (or write your own) Once all students have made their selection, ask students to share why they chose the work they did. Open the floor up for conversation and debate.
3. Repeat step two, selecting a new question each time.

### Possible questions:

1. Which artwork expresses the most tension?
2. Which artwork makes you feel the most uncomfortable?
3. Which artwork do you think took the most time to create?
4. Which artwork do you think is the most valuable?
5. Which artwork do you think best expresses the tenor of race relations of the 1960s?
6. Which artwork is your favorite?
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

## Words and Images

### Materials:

- Color reproductions of works from the *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Painting of the 1960s* exhibition, posted
- [Civil Rights Era Quotes: Ringgold's Content in Context Handout](#) or selected quotes from this handout
- Paper
- Pencils

**Introduction:** After presenting lessons exploring the tenor and trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, explain that Ringgold has made it her life's work to be an artist-activist. Through paintings that explicitly depict the strain of race relations and inequality in the U.S. during this time, Ringgold elevated the consciousness of the country to the struggles of African Americans. Artists do not create in a vacuum; they impact and are impacted by the people and the events of their time. Ringgold points to black writers Amiri Baraka (then LeRoy Jones) and James Baldwin as well as major events of the Civil Rights movement (e.g. "March on Washington" and nationwide race riots) as influences on her thinking and on her work. This activity will ask students to draw connections between Civil Rights era quotes and Ringgold's contemporaneous artworks.

### Procedure:

1. Distribute the [Civil Rights Era Quotes: Ringgold's Content in Context Handout](#) or selected quotes from this handout to each student.
2. Ask each student to select a quote that most speaks to him/her.
3. Now ask each student to summarize, in his or her own words, the quote.
4. Next, each student should select an artwork by Ringgold that best represents the selected quote.
5. Using either an expository or creative writing style, students discuss why they paired their quote and work of art. A case should be made for this connection, using evidence from the quote and the painting.

## Creative Restraint

### Materials:

- Color reproductions OR projected image of *Black Light Series #1: Big Black*
- Paper
- Pencils

Introduction: Share with your students that Faith Ringgold's desire to explore new ways of depicting skin tone of people of color led her to a period of trial and error in the late 1960s. Ringgold's formal education didn't adequately prepare her to depict the rich, varied tonalities of figures of color so she sought to develop an authentic way of doing so. She experimented with various pigment types and colors and restricted her use of white paint. *Big Black*, the first work in this experimental *Black Light Series*, is an abstracted study of **physiognomies** suggested by African masks. Ringgold used a range of blacks tinted with brown, red, yellow, blue, and green pigments in order to animate her images. Despite limiting her use of white paint, Ringgold nonetheless successfully depicts figures that emanate light.

### Procedure:

1. Ask your students to look closely at *Big Black*. Then ask them to create a word bank about this piece by writing down as many colors and shapes as they see. Encourage them to write down at least 15 words.
2. Next, ask them to compose a written response to this work, using words from their bank in the composition.
3. Once they have completed their first draft, remind your students that Ringgold challenged herself by imposing restrictions on the pigments she could use (specifically white). In that spirit, ask your students to revise their writing, explaining that they must replace at least five of the descriptive words in their original composition without losing their meaning. Provide thesauruses for your students' use.
4. Ask students to read aloud their first and second drafts.
5. Now discuss the challenges the students' faced when they were asked to change the vocabulary without impacting the meaning of the composition's message.

## Worksheet: Connect / Extend / Challenge

### *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s*

1. Select one work from the *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s* exhibition that captures your attention. Spend a few minutes looking carefully at this piece and use the space below to jot down or sketch your thoughts. If you haven't already, read the object's label copy.

2. Answer the following:

a. How are the ideas and information presented **CONNECTED** to what you already knew?

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b. What new ideas arose that **EXTENDED** or pushed your thinking in new directions?

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- c. What is still **CHALLENGING** or confusing for you to get your mind around? What questions, wonderings or puzzles do you now have?

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- 3. If time allows, pair up with a peer to share your thoughts, questions, and ideas. What new ideas were generated from your conversation?

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## Civil Rights Era Quotes: Ringgold's Content in Context

### *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s*

"Remember, we are not fighting for the freedom of the Negro alone, but for the freedom of the human spirit a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind."

—Ella Baker

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"Surely the day will come when color means nothing more than skin tone, when religion is seen uniquely as a way to speak one's soul; when birth places have the weight of a throw of the dice and all men are born free, when understanding breeds love and brotherhood."

—Josephine Baker, 1963

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"...When I left St. Louis a long time ago, the conductor directed me to the last car. And you all know what that means.

But when I ran away, yes, when I ran away to [France], I didn't have to do that. I could go into any restaurant I wanted to, and I could drink water anyplace I wanted to, and I didn't have to go to a colored toilet either, and I have to tell you it was nice, and I got used to it, and I liked it, and I wasn't afraid anymore that someone would shout at me and say, 'Nigger, go to the end of the line.' But you know, I rarely ever used that word. You also know that it has been shouted at me many times....

Then after a long time, I came to America.... And when I got to New York way back then, I had other blows—when they would not let me check into the good hotels because I was colored, or eat in certain restaurants. And then I went to Atlanta, and it was a horror to me. And I said to myself, My God, I am Josephine, and if they do this to me, what do they do to the other people in America?"

...So I did open my mouth, and you know I did scream, and when I demanded what I was supposed to have and what I was entitled to...when you scream, friends, I know you will be heard. And you will be heard now."

—Josephine Baker, August 28, 1963

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"Whoever debases others is debasing himself."

—James Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 1963

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"Yes, I knew two or three people, white, whom I would trust with my life, and I knew a few others, white, who were struggling as hard as they knew how, and with great effort and sweat and risk, to make the world more human."

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

“To accept one’s past—one’s history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.”

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

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“It is rare indeed that people give. Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be.”

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

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“In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women.”

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

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“Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality.”

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

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“The importance today in my mind is that for the first time in our history, for the first time in 100 years, the nation shows some signs of really dealing with its central problem instead of, as it has done for 100 years, avoiding it, evading it, debating it, lying about it, pretending it did not exist. The country will have to now go to work, and very hard work and very dangerous work, to change itself to achieve this dream that Martin was talking about.”

—James Baldwin, during the *Hollywood Roundtable* televised discussion, produced by the U.S. Information Agency and moderated by David Schoenbrun, August 28, 1963

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1u27coFIGXg>>

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“I think the American white republic has to ask itself why it was necessary for them to invent the nigger. I am not a nigger. I have never called myself one. But one comes into the world and the world decides that you are this, for its own reasons. And it is very important for the American, in terms of its future, in terms of its health, in terms of the transformation we are all seeking, that he face this question. That he needed the nigger for something.”

—James Baldwin, during the *Hollywood Roundtable* televised discussion, produced by the U.S. Information Agency and moderated by David Schoenbrun, August 28, 1963

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1u27coFIGXg>>

“I really believe in the potential of this country. This country has not realized its potential; it has not begun to scratch its surface....”

—Harry Belafonte, during the *Hollywood Roundtable* televised discussion, produced by the U.S. Information Agency and moderated by David Schoenbrun, August 28, 1963

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1u27coFIGXg>

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“It shocked me into realizing how desperately sick the Negro could be, how he could be led into self-destruction [by “white” society].... So that I find myself, now, reacting very quickly to Negroes who talk about “good hair.” There are some who think light-skinned is somehow preferable to being dark.”

—LeRoy Jones (Amiri Baraka)

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“With the people, for the people, by the people. I crack up when I hear it; I say, with the handful, for the handful, by the handful, 'cause that's what really happens.”

—Fannie Lou Hamer, as quoted in *This Little Light of Mine* (1993) by Hay Mills, a biography on Hamer

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“Like most Americans I have expressed my support of civil rights largely by talking about it at cocktail parties, I’m afraid. But...this summer I could no longer pay only lip service to a cause that was so urgently right and in a time that is so urgently now.”

—Charlton Heston, during the *Hollywood Roundtable* televised discussion, produced by the U.S. Information Agency and moderated by David Schoenbrun, August 28, 1963

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1u27coFIGXg>

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“Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?”

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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“If violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad. If it is wrong to be violent defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it is wrong for America to draft us, and make us violent abroad in defense of her. And if it is right for America to draft us, and teach us how to be violent in defense of her, then it is right for you and me to do whatever is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country.”

—Malcolm X

“I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or flag-saluter, or a flag-waver... I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American Dream, I see an American Nightmare.”

—Malcolm X, “The Ballet or the Bullet” speech,  
Cleveland, OH, April 3, 1964

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“Freedom, true freedom, is not given by governments. Freedom is taken by the people. The true excitement of today...[is] that the people of America are becoming aware that this freedom to their fellow human beings, and I call them human rights, are theirs to give.”

—Joseph Mankiewicz, during the *Hollywood Roundtable*  
televised discussion, produced by the U.S. Information  
Agency and moderated by David Schoenbrun, August  
28, 1963

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1u27coFIGXg>>

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“People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

—Rosa Parks

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“[The] overbearing specter of racism...hovered over all of us.”

—Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge*

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Selected Images From

***American People, Black Light:  
Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s***

National Museum of Women in the Arts  
June 21–November 10, 2013



*Early Works #25: Self-Portrait, 1965*  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 40 inches  
On loan from Elizabeth A. Sackler  
© Faith Ringgold 1965

Photo: Jim Frank



*American People Series #1: Between Friends*, 1963  
Oil on canvas  
40 x 24 inches  
Collection Neuberger Museum of Art  
Purchase College State University of NY  
Museum Purchase with funds provided  
by the Roy R. Neuberger Endowment  
fund and the friends of the Neuberger  
Museum of Art



*American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding, 1967*

Oil on canvas

72 x 96 inches

Courtesy of Faith Ringgold and ACA Galleries, New York

© Faith Ringgold 1967

Photo courtesy ACA Galleries, New York



*American People Series #20: Die, 1967*

Oil on canvas

72 x 144 inches

Courtesy of Faith Ringgold and ACA

Galleries, New York

© Faith Ringgold 1967

Photo courtesy ACA Galleries, New York



*Black Light Series #1: Big Black, 1967*

Oil on canvas

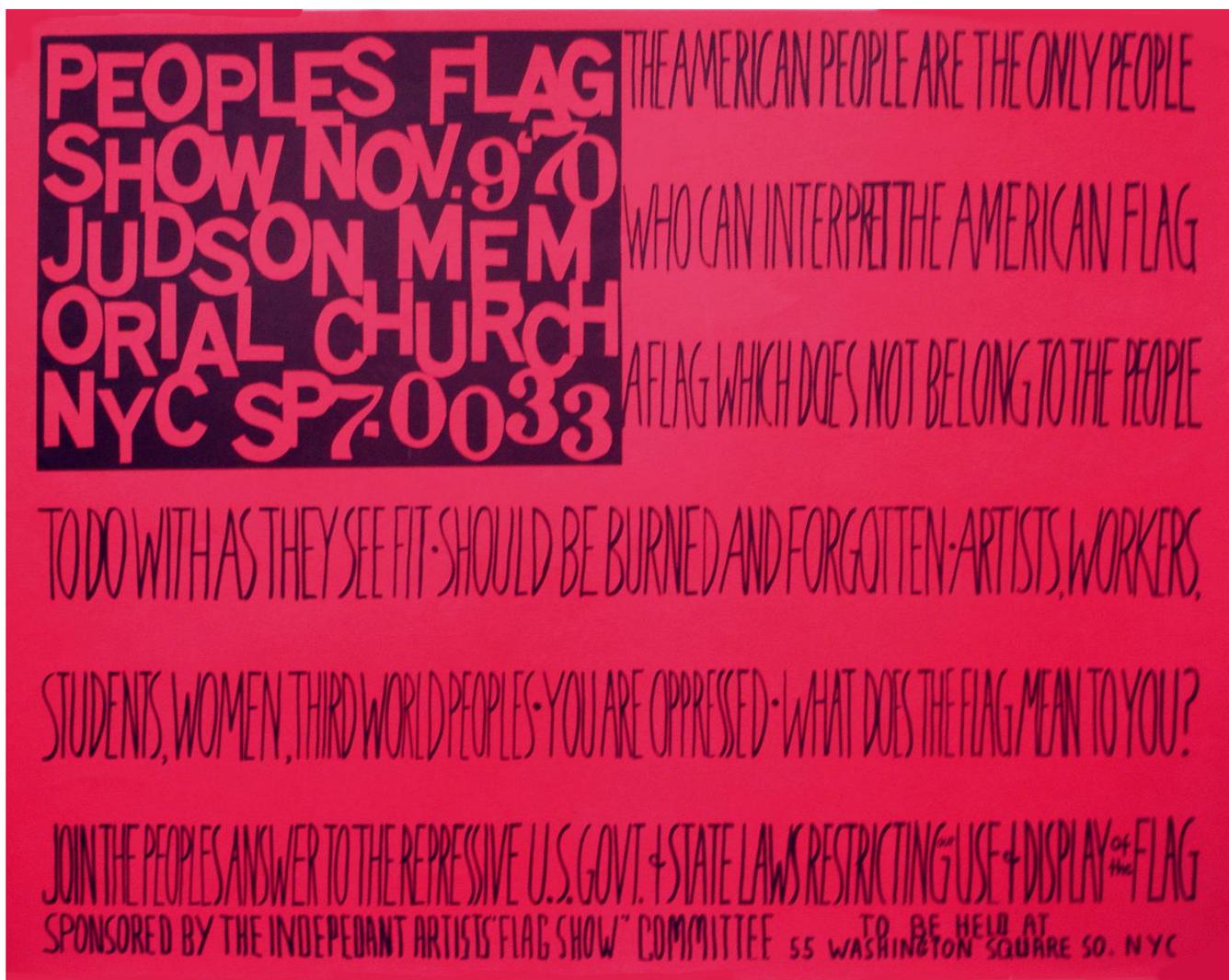
30 ¼ x 42 ¼ inches

Courtesy of Faith Ringgold and ACA

Galleries, New York

© Faith Ringgold 1967

Photo: Jim Frank



*The People's Flag Show, 1970*

Cut paper and pen on paper poster

18 x 24 inches

Courtesy of Faith Ringgold and ACA Galleries, New York

© Faith Ringgold 1970

Photo: Jim Frank



*For The Women's House, 1971*

Oil on canvas

96 x 96 inches

Courtesy Rose M. Singer Center, New York

© Faith Ringgold 1971

Photo courtesy of the artist