stories in cloth
(Edited excerpt from Faith Ringgold. (April, May, 1994). In Scholastic Art, Vol. 24, No. 6, pp. 2-11; 14-16)

"Ever since I was little I've had a need to communicate my ideas through art. Being an artist and writer of children's books fulfills my ambition. I cannot imagine spending life any other way."

— FAITH RINGGOLD

For the last 25 years, contemporary American Faith Ringgold has told visual stories about her life as a black female artist. She began as a painter, but then developed her own unique form of expression, the **story quilt**. The artist says, "I felt painting was cold and distant. I was inspired by African art and I wanted to write stories. The quilt seemed to accept all these things together." And in almost all of her work, she uses her own life and that of her family for ideas and inspiration.

In her quilt series called *The Bitter Nest*, the artist tells the story of a middle-class black family. *Harlem Renaissance Party* (left) shows a fictional dinner attended by well-known African-American artists and writers who lived and worked in Harlem (a section in New York City) during the 1920s. Faith Ringgold identifies with two of her characters-the daughter she was (lower left) and the mother she is now (lower right). The daughter enjoys being with all these famous guests, but is embarrassed by her mother's "odd, looking" African costumes. As an artist and nonconformist, the mother goes her own way, "dancing to music only she could hear."

Faith Ringgold's quilts are bordered by fabrics combining African and American patterns. The artist says, "The story-quilt grew out of my need to tell stories not with pictures alone, but with words." The words of *Harlem Renaissance Party* are included in the text panels integrated into the quilt's border.
Like many of Ringgold's quilts, this one offers a short lesson in African-American history. The artist has included portraits of famous black Americans involved in the arts such as Florence Mills, entertainer; Aaron Douglas, painter; Meta Warwick Fuller, sculptor; W.E.B. DuBois, writer and educator; Alain Locke, philosopher and critic; Countee Cullen, poet; Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes Richard Wright, all writers.

"I became an artist for the same reason I became a writer: I wanted to tell my story."

— FAITH RINGGOLD

Many of Faith Ringgold’s early fabric sculptures, like Mrs. Jones and Family, were based on women the artist had known and admired in her childhood.

Mrs. Jones and Family, © 1973, Faith Ringgold, Fabric and embroidery, 60” x 12” x 16”

Photo by Karen Bell.
"I'm a painter who works in the quilt medium." — FAITH RINGGOLD
"I wanted to discover the classical traditions of African design that would become my classical art form.-FAITH RINGGOLD

African sculpture (above) and the patterns in African Kente cloth (top) have had a great influence on Fatih Ringgold’s story quilts.

Born in Harlem in 1930, Faith Ringgold has lived there most of her life. Ringgold's mother, a
dressmaker and fashion designer, took her son and two young daughters to museums and cultural
events and to see the great performers of the time. She also taught her youngest daughter, Faith,
to sew and to love fabrics.

Ringgold graduated from high school in 1948 and went on to New York's City College.
Remembering her time at school, the artist says, "We were evaluated not so much on originality
as on how well we could copy from Greek busts and the great masters of European painting." At
that time, women were not allowed to go to the School of Liberal Arts, so Ringgold graduated
from the School of Education. And since teaching was a tradition in her family, she became an art
teacher as well as an artist.

As the artist puts it, "Now the struggle began to create an art form out of my own experience, to
find my own role models the masters of African and African-American art such as Meta
Warwick Fuller [sculptor; see pages 2-31, Sargent Johnson, and Jacob Lawrence." She decided to
forget all the art "rules" she had learned and to begin over in order to find her own unique voice.
Ringgold says, "The voice I found was the voice of a child, and the child was in me."

"Everyone was a storyteller when I was a child," the artist says. "The women's stories were of
family history: a marriage, a birth, a death, a love affair, an unfortunate turn of events, a shameful
and shrouded secret, spoken about in hushed tones so we kids could only imagine what really
happened. The men talked about the often adventurous episodes surrounding their migration
north from the South in the early 1900s, about hard times and inequality, and about the war ....
both wars took our men to Europe, where they got a taste of the equality and freedom denied them
at home."

The story-quilt *Tar Beach* (facing page) was done in 1988, but the story is set in the Harlem of
the 1930s. The artist remembers summer nights that were so hot that families had to move to
their apartment roofs (the tar beach) to cool off. She has expressed her memories of a time "when
it was safe to be on the roof under the open sky." Every family was up there, eating, sleeping,
playing games; it was like an all night picnic.

The story Faith Ringgold tells is American and she uses a traditionally female art form—the
quilt—to tell it. But in order to express her African heritage, many of the techniques she uses echo
those that characterize African art. Compare the stylized, mask-like face, features, and headdress
of this African queen (left) with those of the characters in Ringgold's quilts. The flattened
perspective and simplified shapes in *Tar Beach* are also found in most African sculptures. The
scene in the center of the quilt is *painted* in a realistic European-American tradition. The abstract,
geometric border is *sewn* of fabric that resembles both American quilts as well as the patterns in
woven African *kente* cloth (above). The African-American *oral tradition* of story-telling is
reflected in the handwritten panels incorporated into the quilt's border.
This month’s Masterpiece (pages 8-9) reflects Faith Ringgold’s interest in traditional European art.


"As an artist, you can communicate things that you feel and see. You are a voice. You have a power to create." -FAITH RINGGOLD
REWRITING ART HISTORY

Compare the detail (above, center) from Faith Ringgold's story quilt (pages 8-9) with the two paintings on either side by Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh. Although Van Gogh was a white European male who lived and worked more than a century ago, Faith Ringgold identifies with his hard life as a struggling artist.

"We artists are alone, poor, treated like madmen and because of it, becoming so.” — VINCENT VAN GOGH

In the summer of 1961, Faith Ringgold traveled with her mother and two daughters to Europe. Faith was 30 years old, a high school art teacher, and a black divorced mother of two young children. She had just finished getting a masters degree in fine art at New York's City College and now she wanted to devote her time to creating art. To help her decide what to do, she went to Europe to see the great works of the old masters.

Not only did this trip help her choose her career, it was also the inspiration for a series of eight story quilts. These quilts, called The French Collection, are like a fantastic visual novel. In them, the main character, named Willia, challenges the white, European, male-oriented art world.
One of these quilts (see pages 8-9) called *The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles* refers to some of the best-known images in Western art—the paintings of sunflowers (above) by 19th-century Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh [van-GO]. In Ringgold's story, a quilting bee (a gathering of quilters) is being held in Arles, a region in southern France where Van Gogh did his most important paintings. The women are all well-known African Americans (left to right): Madame Walker, a businessperson, gave jobs to thousands of people; Sojourner Truth advanced women's rights during slavery; Ida Wells exposed the horrors of lynching in the South; Fannie Lou Hamer registered many people to vote; Harriet Tubman led more than 300 slaves to freedom; Rosa Parks sat in the front of a segregated bus, beginning the civil rights movement; Mary McLeod Bethune was adviser to two presidents; Ella Baker improved housing, jobs, and consumer education.

In the text of this story quilt, the women ask Willia what she is doing in Europe, hinting that she may be as disturbed as this man Van Gogh (Van Gogh had periods of intense creativity interrupted by attacks of mental illness). Willia answers, "I came to France to seek opportunity. It is not possible for me to be an artist in the States." The women reply, "We are all artists. Piecing is our art. We brought it straight from Africa."

In *The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles*, as in all her story quilts, Ringgold combines African art traditions with European and American influences. Her asymmetrical composition (not the same on each side, but visually balanced) is divided into two areas, The figures and quilt in the lower left are done in an African tradition characterized by simplified, stylized shapes and flat, repeat patterns. The European- influenced area in the upper right echoes Van Gogh's more naturalistic style, emphasizing perspective and individual brushstrokes. The two areas are joined by the horizontal row of faces leading to one of the painting's focal points, the vertical figure of Van Gogh. The composition is unified by the repeated circular shapes of the faces and sunflowers. The bright colors (yellows, greens, blues) echo Van Gogh's intense color schemes as well as the bright hues in African fabrics.
“Everything about my life has to do with the fact that I am a black woman.” — FAITH RINGGOLD

What story does 19th-century painter Winslow Homer tell?

The Drawing Lesson

Until the beginning of the 20th century, visual stories were told in a very realistic style. In the watercolor above, late 19th-century American painter Winslow Homer has presented a very lifelike picture of the way art was taught over a century ago. Students learned drawing by copying examples the teacher put on the blackboard—only vertical, horizontal, diagonal, and circular lines were to be used in simple combinations such as squares, triangles, and semicircles.

Homer may have planned this painting according to these drawing rules, limiting his composition to horizontal lines, the vertical line of the figure, and the rectangular shape of the blackboard. The blackboard becomes the focal point of the painting, framing the teacher's head and the diagonal line of the pointer she is holding. The blackboard and the symbols written on it serve as a painting within a painting; As you can see, the artist has even signed and dated its lower right-hand corner.

WORDS AND PICTURES

Three artists who include words and symbols in their art.

Comic Tales

Do you recognize the figures in the painting above? When Look Mickey was first shown at the beginning of the 1960s, many people were outraged. They didn't consider Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, or any other comic-strip character to have anything to do with art.

Contemporary painter Roy Lichtenstein and other Pop artists of the time felt they were surrounded by exciting visual images that were being taken for granted. So they began painting objects like soup cans, fast food, advertising signs, and comic books. In Look Mickey, the artist didn't just copy a comic. By enlarging its scale and exaggerating the printing techniques—black lines, "speech balloons," and bright, flat colors—Lichtenstein caused people to see a "popular" image like a comic strip in an entirely new way.

The lettering in this painting is larger and more noticeable than actual comic strip lettering. Perhaps the artist was suggesting that he was playing a joke on the art world with his new "comic book" style.
How can a comic strip be considered a work of art?


A King's Story

This jewelry box (above) was last opened by its owner, 18-year-old king Tutankhamun (Toot-an-KAHM-on), more than 3,320 years ago. It held the Egyptian king's many rings, bracelets, and earrings. The figures on the top and sides are not only decorative, they also tell stories about King Tut.

To communicate with each other, the ancient Egyptians developed a complex system of picture-writing called hieroglyphs (Hi-ro-gliffs). The symbols on top of the box are read right to left and spell out Tutankhamun's name. To show respect, the name of the god Amun was written first, but is read after "Tut" and "ankh." The other symbols are the king's royal titles.
The hieroglyphs carved into the box above spell out the name of its owner, an ancient Egyptian king.

Cartouche-shaped box, c. 1325 B.C., 25" x 12" x 12 5/8" Cairo Museum.

In the square panel on the front, Tut's name appears three times—his personal name (left), his throne name (center), and the secret name he used to contact the gods (right). The symbols under the names say: "Given life like [the God] Ra for ever."
YOU BE THE ART CRITIC

How successfully do these award-winning designs combine words and images?

Assignment A B C D E F – Narumi Hahamura, 16, Saga-Kenritsu-Arita-Kogyo H.S. Japan
Fabric artist Faith Ringgold invented her own art form, the story-quilt, to tell stories about her family and people who have been important in her life. She incorporates the words of her tales into her quilts so they become part of the design. Other artists like the ancient Egyptians (page 11) told stories with symbolic pictures. Roy Lichtenstein (pages 10-11) includes "speech balloons" with his comic images, while Jenny Holtzer (page 16) creates images using words alone.

As you can see, there are many ways to use words or letters to tell a visual story. In this workshop you'll do something a little different—you'll have a chance to be an art critic. On the opposite page are some design assignments using words. On the right are six solutions created by Scholastic Art Award-winning students. Read each assignment, then circle the letter you think goes with the solution (there may be several possibilities). How well was the assignment carried out? Did the artist fulfill all requirements? What grade would you give each solution?

Assignment A B C D E F — Teeny Chang, 17, Farragut High School, Knoxville, TN, Teacher: Melynda Whetsel
Circle the letter of the assignment that goes with the design. Answers at end of article.

Assignment A B C D E F — Shannon Simmons, 17, Walt Whitman High School, Bethesda, MD. Teacher: Marjorie Scott
Assignment A  B  C  D  E  F — Amber Korpak, 17. Montrose High School, Montrose, PA.
Teacher: Robert Smith

Assignment A  B  C  D  E  F — George Hatke, 13. Oneida High Schoo, Schenectady, NY.
Teacher: Patricia Breiter
ASSIGNMENTS

A. 3-D Design. Choose a well-known person and tell the story of his or her most famous achievement(s). Include the person's name or picture and illustrate the achievement(s) by using at least three elements of design such as space (can extend in either two or three dimensions), line (short, long, continuous, straight, curved, thick, or thin), shape (geometric, or organic), color, or texture (rough, smooth, coarse, fine, shiny, or dull).

B. Self-Portrait Create a self-portrait incorporating type in a way that will express your personality. If you are feeling confident, you can crop in on the face, filling the entire format; a very small image will communicate timidity or shyness. Bright, bold colors and heavy, dark lines can express power and strength; thin lines can suggest the opposite. You can include type as a speech balloon, a caption, handwriting, or as part of the features. The larger, thicker, heavier, brighter the type, the more forceful your message.

C. Poster Design Pick a concept you feel strongly about or that carries a message, and reduce it to a single word. Do a design that illustrates the word. You can use just letters or combine them with an illustration. Use an appropriate typeface (will it be thick/thin, dark/light, tall/narrow, short/wide?). Limit colors to black, white, gray, and one appropriate color.

D. Cubist Painting At the start of the 20th century, Cubist artists wanted to show all aspects of reality. They flattened their images and presented each side of an object as a geometric plane. In order to heighten the feeling of reality, Cubists were the first to put actual type (labels, newspaper clippings, headlines) into paintings.

Select objects and/or people and create a Cubist painting, incorporating any type elements you feel will clarify Your images.

E. 2-D Design Emphasizing the design element of space, design a card for a friend, relative, or someone you admire. Personalize the card by including the person's name or picture and suggest at least one distinctive characteristic (an interest in music, dance, favorite colors). Combine type and images, stressing/contrasting positive shapes (interior area of an object) and negative space (area surrounding or between shapes).

F. "How I Spent the Last 24 Hours" Design a creative mixed media solution to the above statement. You may integrate handwriting, type, and/or photographic images. Use at least three of the following design principles: repetition; progression; theme and variation; rest areas; rhythm. Develop an imaginative and appropriate framework to unify all these different visual elements.
These contemporary American artists use words in unusual ways.

What kind of story does the construction on the left tell?
Ashley Bickerton, b. 1953. Tormented Self-Portrait Susie at Arles #2, 1988. Mixed-media construction. 90” x 69” x 18” Sonnabend Gallery. N.Y., N.Y.

More Stories in Cloth

Contemporary American artist Jenny Holtzer (who did the T-shirt below, right) uses words to tell stories, but her works are not usually found in museums or art galleries. Her messages are
flashed on scoreboards at sports events, printed on buses, found in phone booths, and broadcast on TV. She uses advertising techniques to get attention, but her "Holtzergrams" carry other messages.

The artist feels strongly about a number of issues—the environment, governmental power, AIDS, the poor. She sends out short, attention-getting, sometimes controversial statements related to these subjects. Sometimes her messages turn words around in an ironic way—MONEY CREATES TASTE or SELF-AWARENESS CAN BE CRIPPLING or (right) ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE.

Many artists who use words in their art combine the letters with images. Holtzer thinks of her words as images in themselves, and changes their size, type, color, and surroundings to fit each statement.

“I want to make art that’s understandable, that becomes part of people’s lives.” — JENNY HOLTZER

A Modern Consumer

What do you make of the construction (above, left) by contemporary artist Ashley Bickerton? Do you recognize any of the symbols the artist has used? Does the piece take on more meaning when you know it is titled Tormented Self-Portrait?

Ashley Bickerton was born on the island of Barbados (in the Caribbean, off the South American coast), grew up in Hawaii, and went to school in Southern California—all areas in which popular culture intrudes heavily on nature. In this self-portrait, the artist defines himself in terms of the commercial products he uses, eats, and reads. The pleasing design, which includes lettering and circles, squares, ovals, and rectangles, seems more accepting than critical of today's consumer-oriented society. Which of the products included here might the artist feel are "tormenting" him?

Suggested answers to Workshop: page 14, top to bottom: b, e (maybe b), a. (maybe c). Page 15, tp to bottom, c, f (maybe b or d), d (maybe b)